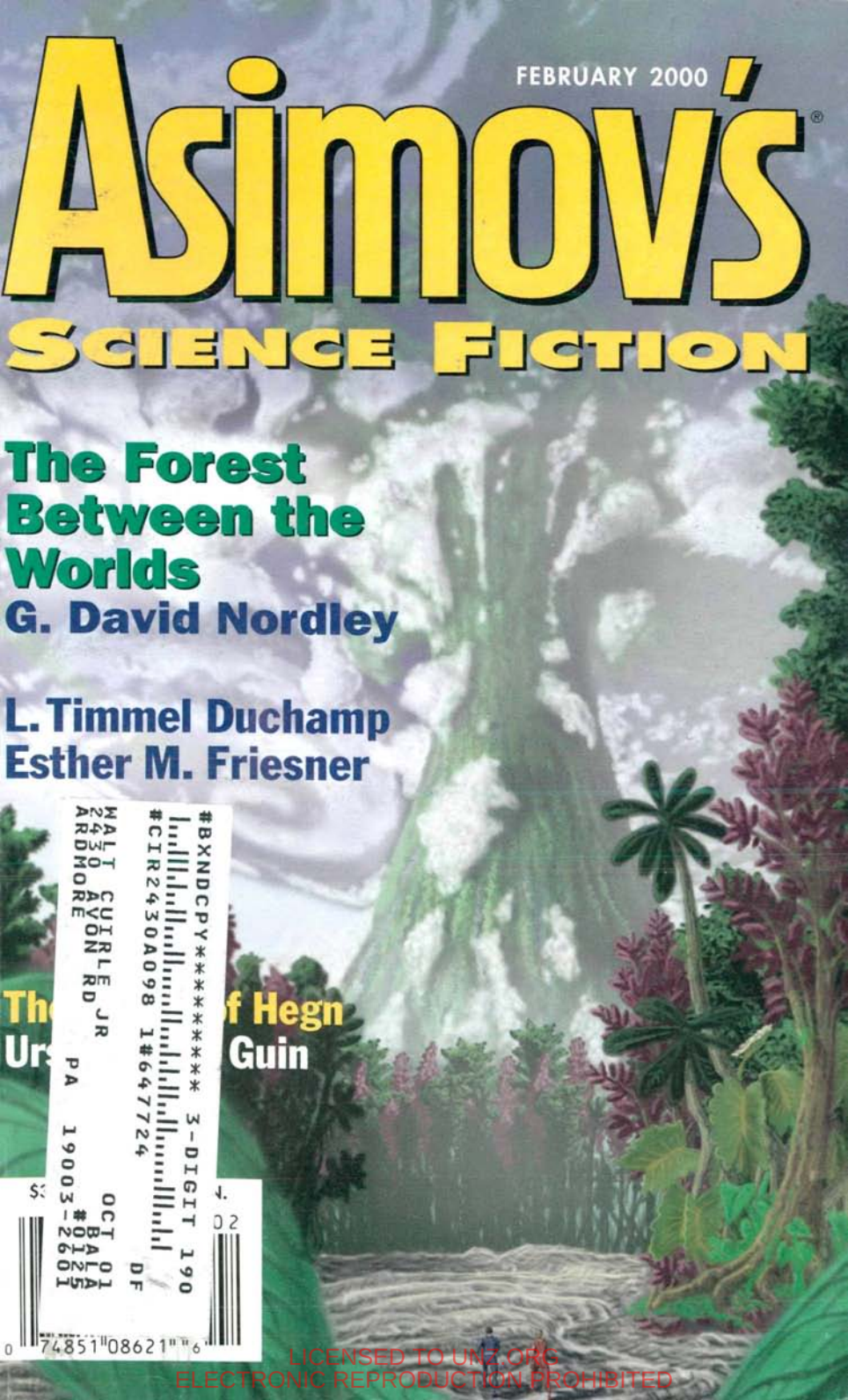

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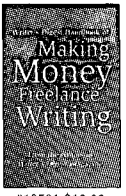

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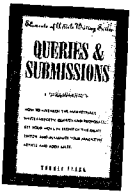

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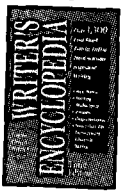

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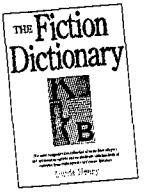

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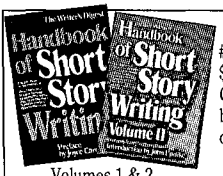

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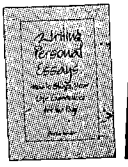

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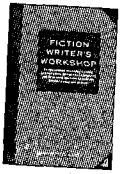

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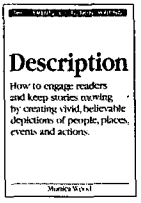
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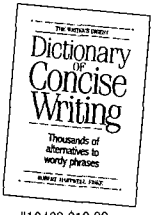

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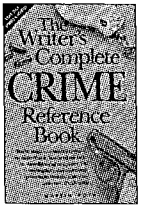

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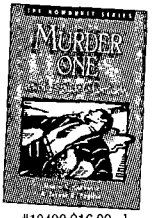

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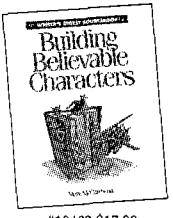

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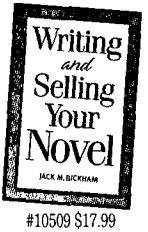

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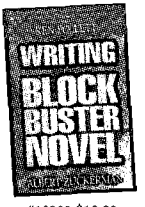

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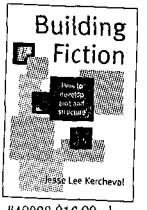

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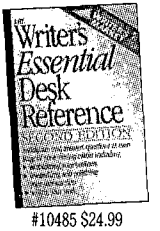

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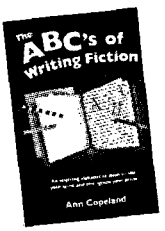

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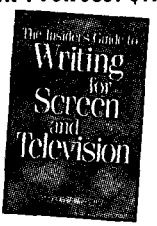

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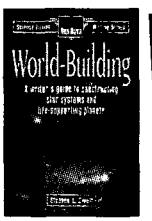

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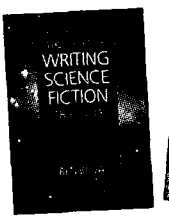

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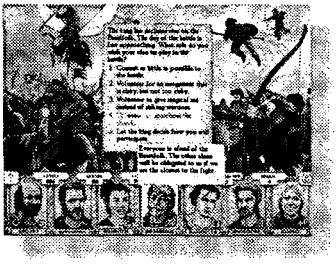

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

SIX DEGREES OF ROBERT SILVERBERG

You may have heard of the Hollywood game called "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon," which revolves around the fact that that particular actor, though not himself a star of the first magnitude, has in the course of the past ten or fifteen years appeared in films with so many film luminaries that a line can be drawn connecting him to virtually anyone who has ever been in a movie. That is to say, Bacon played in film such-and-such with actor A, who previously had appeared in film this-and-that with Actor B, who earlier had starred with actors C, D, and E in film something-or-other, and E appeared with Lillian Gish in a film made in 1928, and Lillian Gish appeared in films with just about everybody at the dawn of the industry, and so in five or six hops Kevin Bacon connects with the great silent-movie stars.

In an idle moment on a quiet rainy day I began to wonder what sort of Baconesque six-degrees-of-separation linkages could be fashioned out of my own career, which by now spans the five decades from 1954 to 1999 and is heading on into a sixth. There are half a dozen or so writers still active whose careers extend ten years or so longer than mine (and one, amazingly, whose first published story antedates mine by a quarter of a century!), but my career does cover a substantial fraction of the entire history of science fiction in magazine form.

The pioneering all-science-fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories,* began publication in 1926. So *Amazing* was a mere twenty-eight years old when I sold my first story. *Weird Tales,* which I suppose could be called the first fantasy magazine, is three years older than *Amazing.* All I needed to do was find a magazine that contained both a story of mine and a story by someone who was already a long-time contributor to one of those magazines when I came on the scene, and I would have a bridge between my career and the misty origins of our field.

That wasn't hard thing to do at all. The September 1956 issue *of Astounding Science Fiction*—the magazine that is now called *Analog*—contains my story "A Mind for Business" and Murray Leinster's story "The Swamp Was Upside Down." I've had occasion to mention Leinster more than once in recent columns. His real name was Will F. Jenkins, and he was born in 1896; he was a well known, widely published writer even before *Amazing Stories* and *Weird Tales* were founded. Surely Murray Leinster's long career would connect anybody with anybody in science fiction.

And indeed it does. A search of the archives reveals that there was a Leinster story in the June 1926 issue of *Amazing.* The same issue contained stories by H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. (They were reprints, to be sure—Verne had been dead quite a while by 1926, and Wells had long since given up writing science fiction—but there's nothing in the rules about reprints, is there?) So Murray Leinster connects me, on just one hop, to the two writers generally considered to be the originators of modern science fiction!

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But wait. There's more. The very first issue of *Amazing*, April 1926, also has stories by Wells and Verne . . . and one by Edgar Allan Poe! Which produces this chain, a mere three degrees of separation: Silverberg/Leinster/Wells-and-Verne/Poe.

[I should point out here that my work in sketching these lines of connection was made very much easier by the invaluable *Science Fiction, Fantasy & Weird Fiction Magazine Index (1890-1997)* that the indefatigable William G. Contento and Stephen T. Miller compiled, and Charles Brown's Locus Publications makes available both on the *Locus* web site (*www.locusmag.com*) and in CD-ROM format.]

I didn't need Contento-Miller to do the job, of course. It happens that I do own quite an extensive file of ancient science fiction magazines, and also the two print-format indexes, done by Donald B. Day and Norm Metcalf, that cover those magazines from 1926 to 1965. By careful use of those two volumes, and then by rummaging around downstairs among the fragile old magazines for hours and hours, I could, eventually, have traced all the linkages I describe here. How much easier it was, though, merely to look them up via computer, where the "Robert Silverberg" entry in the extraordinarily versatile *Locus* index not only gives me publication information about all my myriad stories, but allows me, with a single click, to access the complete table of contents for the magazines in which each of those stories appeared. In that way I am quickly able to find out who my issue-mates were; and then, by clicking onward, say, through Murray Leinster's archive, I wind up back among his linkages to Verne and Wells.

Using Contento-Miller, then, it's but the work of a moment to connect me to two other great pioneers of

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science-fiction and fantasy, H.P. Lovecraft and Stanley G. Weinbaum. The Lovecraft link is by way of Jack Williamson, whose career, alluded to above, stretches back more than seventy years since his debut in 1928 and provides linkages galore for just about everybody. He and I both had stories in the Harlan Ellison anthology *Medea,* and Williamson's serial "The Cometeers" hooks up with Lovecraft's "Shadow Out of Time" in the June 1936 *Astounding.* Voila! (Harlan, who also had a story in that anthology, gets linked to Lovecraft the same way, and so do Frank Herbert, Kate Wilhelm, Tom Disch, and the rest of the *Medea* cast. Which means that anyone who can be linked to one of them gets attached in a couple of jumps to Lovecraft.)

The Weinbaum-Silverberg link is just as easy: Silverberg to Leinster as above, Leinster to Weinbaum via the December 1935 *Astounding* with Leinster's "Fourth-Dimensional Demonstrator" and Weinbaum's "The Mad Moon." (Weinbaum's name may be unfamiliar to you, and what a pity, in that case. He was a brilliant writer who zoomed into science fiction in 1934 with a wondrously entertaining story that is still regarded as one of the greatest SF short stories ever, "A Martian Odyssey," and won tremendous popularity in the next year and a half—only to die at the age of thirty-five in December 1935, with his finest work still unwritten. Though Weinbaum was virtually a prehistoric figure of our field, his stories remain capable of holding the attention of modern readers.)

What does all this mean for more recent writers? Bearing in mind that I was a veritable novice with just three years of professional writing behind me when Murray Leinster linked me up with Wells, Verne, and Poe, you can see that anyone who's appeared in a science-fiction magazine with *me* in the past few decades shares that same lofty linkage. And that's quite a few people. All you have to do, then, is manage to get a story published in the same issue as one of mine, and you are irrevocably connected with the whole history of science fiction!

Let us leave out of our calculations the fact that one of these "Reflections" pieces of mine has appeared in each number of *Asimov's* since the July 1994 issue. Since just about anybody who's anybody has had a story in *Asimov's* somewhere in the past six years, scores and scores of my present-day colleagues would thus be linked by these columns to Edgar Allan Poe. That's too easy. Let's just stick to fiction.

Here's the April 1994 issue. My novella "Via Roma" is in it, along with stories by Isaac Asimov and Frederik Pohl (who don't need my help to construct their own lines of linkage back to Pleistocene science fiction) and also Mike Resnick, Michael Swanwick, Pat Murphy, Andrew Weiner, and four or five other people who probably would be quite surprised to discover how few degrees of separation stand between them and the author of "The Cask of Amontillado."

Or—here I am in the October/November 1998 issue with a novelette called "Waiting for the End." That story provides connections to the past not only with the well-established Joe Haldeman and Bruce Sterling, but with Danith McPherson, R. Neube, and Cory Doctorow, whose careers as SF writers don't go back very far into history.

And suppose we play the game using some of the relatively recent writers as starting points. Cory Doctorow, for example: I provide a second link to him, using his third published story, "Craphound," from *Science Fiction Age* for March 1998.

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That ties him to my "The Colonel in Autumn," and back on through my whole progression of links to Messrs. Wells, Verne, and Poe. Or, using another route, Doctorow's first published story, from a 1992 issue of *Pulphouse,* connects him to Mike Resnick, who links up with Brian Aldiss in 1988, Aldiss links with Silverberg in 1958, and so on.

Take Jerry Oltion. His story "Abridged Edition" in the July 1994 *Fantasy & Science Fiction* links him to Bruce Sterling, and Sterling links him to me, and I, as you've seen, go right back through Murray Leinster to Edgar Allan Poe. Hardly any degrees of separation at all for a writer who—from my point of view, anyway, and Poe's—started his career just a couple of minutes ago.

Or Elizabeth Hand, who has barely more than a decade of professional writing behind her. Hand's "Last Summer at Mars Hill," *Fantasy & Science Fiction,* August 1994, links her to Rob Chilson. Chilson's "The Big Rock," *Analog,* October 1969, links him to Keith Laumer. Laumer's "Body Builders," *Galaxy,* August 1966, ties him to James Blish, and Blish's "Bindlestiff," *Astounding,* December 1950, connects with L. Sprague de Camp, whose "Blue Giraffe," *Astounding,* August 1939, links him to Ray Cummings, born in 1887. Cummings' "Around the Universe," *Amazing,* October 1927, delivers us to H.G. Wells.

Likewise we can hook up the esteemed editor of this very magazine, Gardner Dozois, to Ray Cummings and H.G. Wells via James Blish, since Gardner's first story, "The Empty Man" (*If,* September 1966) overlaps with a novel by Blish that was running serially there at the same time. And so it goes.

What significance does all this have, though?

Not very much, I suspect. A chance to have some fun with your computer in a lazy moment, is all. Idle thoughts on a rainy day. O

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

READERS' WRITERS

It's Personal

I've been wanting to write this particular column ever since I took this gig, but couldn't figure out exactly how to do it. Astute readers may have noticed that I rarely miss an opportunity to mention authors' URLs in passing. That's because, for this writer at least, the coolest of what's cool about the net is the direct and personal access it affords to readers. I can put anything I want up on my site for the world to see, and I don't have to ask an editor's permission to do it. Which is not to say that I have anything against editors—why, some of my best friends are editors! But an author's website is not a magazine; when Gardner and Sheila edit *Asimov's,* they are trying to deliver a specific effect to a more clearly defined audience than I am in my personal slice of cyberspace.

The thing is, I've been in the field since the second Nixon administration and I know a lot of people. So a column reviewing authors' websites smelled to me like a can of worms. It could be trouble if I reviewed some pals and not others. And no way was I going to review only friends. I may be a tyro at columnizing, but I'm trying hard to get the ethics thing figured out. So how to choose?

The answer came to me in the pages of the September *Asimov's,* specifically pages eight and nine, wherein are listed the 13th Annual Readers' Award Results. If you voted, then this is your column and I thank you for solving my problem. Now understand, I can't review all the folks you honored; they only give me a nineteen-hundred-word slot here. So I apologize for not clicking to the many excellent poets who publish in these pages, or to the fine artists, cover and interior, whose images grace our words. My preliminary list included the top finishers in the novella, novelette, and short story categories.

Caveats

Alas, not everyone who writes well has the time or inclination to create a website. Perhaps the most egregious truant is my friend **Michael Swanwick**, who had a career year last year in short fiction. He placed four pieces on the Readers' Awards lists, either solo or in collaboration. Too busy for the web, eh, Michael? One of his collaborators was his precocious son **Sean Swanwick,** another was our own **Gardner Dozois**, who is at least as good a writer as he is an editor. I couldn't find a site for the wonderful British writer **Ian MacLeod** or for the versatile and prolific **R. Garcia y Robertson. William Barton** has the front page of a site up, but none of his links work yet, so I have to mark him absent. I've followed the underappreciated **Robert Reed**'s work for a decade now, but not yet on the web. And what's **Lisa Goldstein**'s

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excuse? She's one of our very best and she lives in one of the most wired places in the country. Searching for talented newcomers like **Danith McPherson** and **Lawrence Person** produced no hits. If any of these writers does have a site that I've missed, or they come on-line in the future, drop me an email and I'll get them into the first available column.

Some writers who are on the web have pages maintained for them by fans. Almost all of the fan sites reviewed below appear to have been created in close collaboration with the writers. But a third party may not take as active an interest in updating a tribute site as someone who creates a site for herself. For that matter, putting a site up for oneself may prove so traumatic that a writer may be reluctant to return to the scene of the crime for some time thereafter.

Please understand that, like other sites I've reviewed, these are of varying quality. Comment on a website is not intended as comment on a writer's work. You have already indicated your opinions of these folks by voting them your faves of the year. I couldn't agree with you more.

Meet the Pros

The Stephen Baxter Fan Page *(http://www.sam.math.ethz.ch/%7Epkeller/Baxter-Page.html)* is maintained by Philipp Leonard Keller; however, at the time I clicked in, it hadn't been updated in over two years. While its "Upcoming Appearances" and "Forthcoming Publications" sections are a little dusty, there is nevertheless a lot here to enjoy. Particularly recommended is the story "Good News" of which Stephen and Philipp write, "This story is an experiment. We have attempted to use the facilities of the Web to break out of the normal linear mode of storytelling. Thus, 'Good News' is set out as a matrix, of time and perception."

Terry Bisson Science Fiction Story Showcase *(http://www.sff.net/people/tbisson/)* offers ample evidence that Terry *gets* cyberspace; he offers us a generous helping of his fiction and nonfiction. Not the least of this website's many virtues is that it will make you laugh out loud. Take for example this pocket review of *eXistenZ,* from Terry's Film and Video Notes: "Wake me when it's over. Then wake me again when it's really over."

Tony Daniel Making Up a Story *(http://www.users.interport.net/~tdaniel/tonydaniel/index.html)* isn't your ordinary advertisements-for-myself author's site. Tony writes "I thought it might be interesting to both readers and new writers to get a glimpse of the making of a book or story, to see the behind-the-scenes process by which a piece of my writing coalesces." As an example, check out the "The Conception Web of *Metaplanetary,*" hyperlinked notes and sketches for Tony's current novel in progress. It's my experience that this is exactly the kind of clutter from which books are made.

I first became an **L. Timmel Duchamp** fan *(http://www.halcyon.com/ltimmel/)* in 1994, although I have never met her and was briefly confused about whether she was a woman or a man. I was delighted to discover that she had a web site and astonished by its quality. This is perhaps the most personal of these personal websites. It features stories and hyper-linked essays, including a wonderful autobiography, "The Artist as a Young Girl," and several literate and passionate appreciations of other writers.

Greg Egan's Home Page *(http://www.netspace.net.au/~gregegan/index.html)* has perhaps the largest wow factor of any author's website

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I've ever seen. Greg provides just this biography: "I am a science fiction writer and a computer programmer." The rest of the site is devoted to the work—and what marvelous work it is! Not to be missed is the story "The Planck Dive" and its ancillary materials, including Java applets that simulate views of black holes and technical notes—with equations!—on microphysics.

The Real Janet Kagan Home Page *(http://users.inetcentral.com/erickagan/index.html)* is a folksy little site with a bibliography, a free story and some pictures of Janet and friends. Although she claims to be a newbie at website design, everything here works just fine, thank you.

Nancy Kress's Home Page *(http://www.sff.net/people/nankress/)* is slick and well designed. I particularly liked the pages where readers can sample the work—fellow writers take note. There are two complete stories here and several first chapters. And, of course, since she is possibly the best SF writer who writes about writing, there's some sound advice about the craft.

Geoffrey A. Landis *(http://www.sff.net/people/geoffrey.landis/)* is a science fiction writer who is also a working scientist; his web site reflects both sides of C.P. Snow's Two Cultures. In fact, you could get so intrigued by Geoff's involvement with the exploration of Mars that you might forget to scroll all the way down to the fiction section of his site. That would be a mistake, since Geoff is one of our most accomplished writers.

Paul J. McAuley *(http://www.omegacom.demon.co.uk/)* tells us that he is "one of the new wave of British radical hard science fiction writers." His site is straightforward and well-maintained; it includes a brief biography, novel samples, and a couple of free stories as well as an interesting essay on the Mars that science fiction writers have imagined over the years.

The Ian McDonald Information Page *(http://www.lysator.liu.se/~unicorn/mcdonald/)* is maintained for Ian by Hans Persson. While its design is nothing special, the site offers an updated bibliography and a generous sampling of stories and opinion—check out the reprint of a gleefully catty GoH speech about cyberpunks and the genesis of the next SF movement.

Mary Rosenblum *(http://www.sff.net/people/MaryRosenblum/)* asks that we look at her site as a first draft. Fair enough. There is some good information here about Mary's work and a brief autobiographical sketch but Mary has been busy writing lately and really hasn't had much time to spend on her site.

The **Kristine Kathryn Rusch Official Website** *(http://www.horrornet.com/rusch.htm)* is maintained for Kris. It has a bibliography, cover art and book blurbs, an appearance schedule and an editorial and a review penned by Kris. Like many author sites, my own included, it would seem to get only sporadic updates.

Quasi-Official Robert Silverberg Home Page *(http://www.connectexpress.com/~jon/silvhome.htm)* Bob writes "What I mean by (Quasi-Official) is that this is as close to an official site as I'm ever going to have, because I lack the technical skills to build a site of my own, as well as the time and, I suppose, the energy." Nevertheless, webmaster Jon Davis offers a fine introduction to what has truly been one of science fiction's most striking careers, both in terms of quantity and quality.

Bruce Sterling is but one of three hosts of the **Mirrorshades Postmodern Archive** *(http://www.well.com/conf/mirrorshades/)*, but his fingerprints would seem to be all over the keyboard. More than any-

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one else, Bruce was the one who convinced me to start releasing Kelly scribblings to the web. He has made a career out of making his own journalism and ~~rants~~ opinion pieces available to the digerati, and this site will direct you to a metric ton of vintage Sterlingiana, although, interestingly enough, no free fiction.

A Reader-Friendly Guide to Howard Waldrop *(http://www.sff.net/people/waldrop/)* is a likable little page put together by friends of the man Eileen Gunn calls "a *legendary* unknown writer." There are a couple of brief homages and a bibliography laced with wonderful commentary from "Haard."

Exit

Last, and possibly least, there is the **James Patrick Kelly Strange But Not A Stranger** *(www.jimkelly.net)*. I know it's bad form to mention my own website, but the fact of the matter is that you placed me on the Readers' Awards list twice last year, for which I am most grateful. But rather than extol the virtues of my site, let me point out its largest flaw. As I write this in the dog days of August, it's been four months since Mr. Bigshot-Internet-Columnist updated his own site. And I have no plans to do it anytime soon. My excuses for this are many and I won't bore you with them, but I imagine that I'm like a lot of writers who put up their own websites. We start them with good intentions and high ambition, but at this point in the evolution of the internet, websites are incidental to our careers. Readers know us by the stories we write for *Asimov's*, not the HTML we upload to our servers.

I can kid Michael Swanwick about being absent from the net, but would I trade "Radiant Doors" for a Swanwick website? No way! ○

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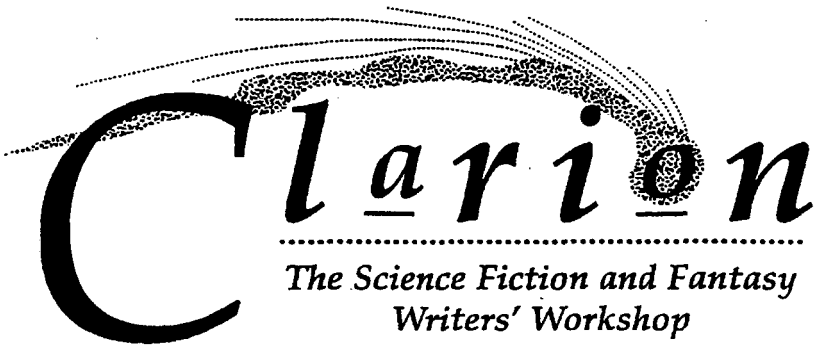

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Ursula K. Le Guin

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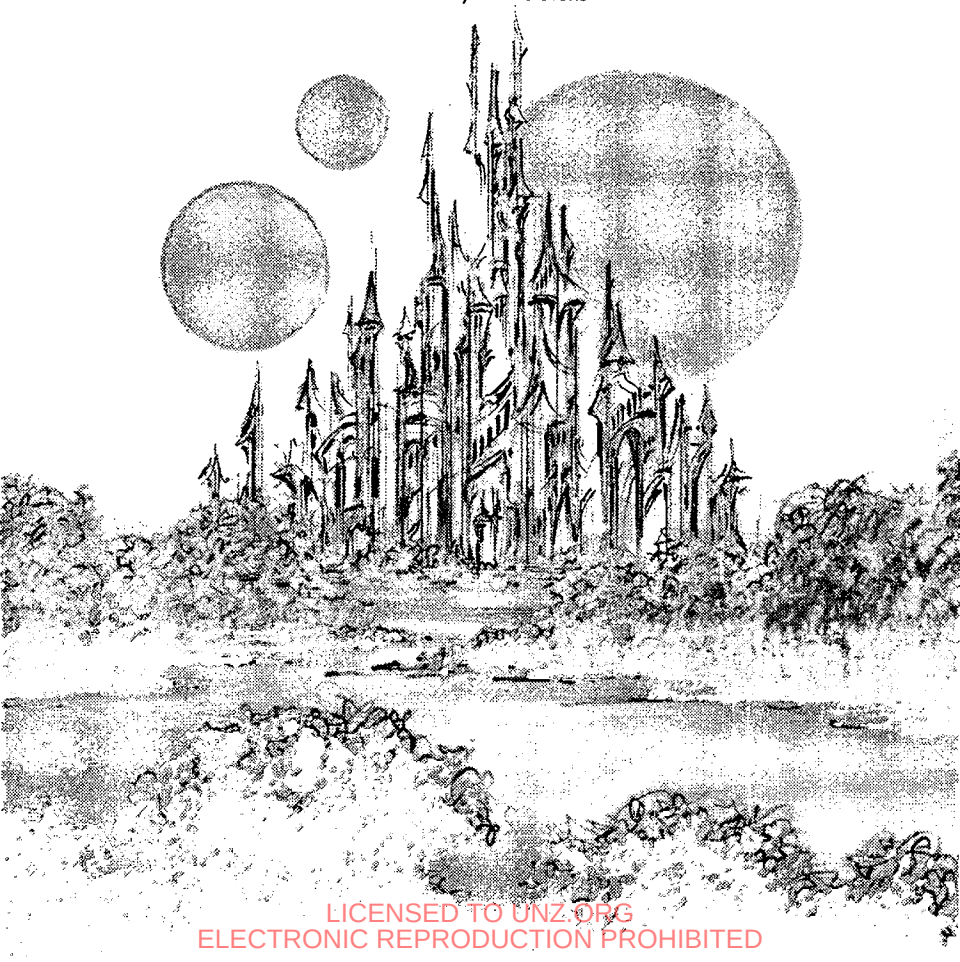
THE ROYALS OF HEGN

Illustration by John Stevens



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Hegn is a small country, an island monarchy blessed with a marvelous climate and a vegetation so rich that lunch or dinner there consists of reaching up to a tree to pluck a succulent, sunwarmed, ripe, rare steak-fruit, or sitting down under a llumbush and letting the buttery morsels drop onto one's lap or straight into one's mouth. And then for dessert there are the sorbice blossoms, tart, sweet, and crunchy.

Four or five centuries ago the Hegnish were evidently an enterprising, stirring lot, who built good roads, fine cities, noble country houses and palaces, all surrounded by literally delicious gardens. Then they entered a settling-down phase, and at present they simply live in their beautiful houses. They have hobbies, pursued with tranquil obsession. Some take up the cultivation and breeding of ever finer varieties of grapes. (The Hegnian grape is self-fermenting; a small cluster of them has the taste, scent, and effect of a split of Veuve Clicquot. Left longer on the vine, the grapes reach 80 or 90 proof, and the taste comes to resemble a good single malt whiskey.) Some raise pet gorkis, an amiable, short-legged domestic animal; others embroider pretty hangings for the churches; many take their pleasure in sports. They all enjoy social gatherings.

People dress nicely for these parties. They eat some grapes, dance a little, and talk. Conversation is desultory and, some would say, vapid. It concerns the kind and quality of the grapes, discussed with much technicality; the weather, which is usually settled fair, but can always be threatening, or have threatened, to rain; and sports, particularly the characteristically Hegnish game of sutpot, which requires a playing field of several acres and involves two teams, many rules, a large ball, several small holes in the ground, a movable fence, a short, flat bat, two vaulting poles, four umpires, and several days. No non-Hegnish person has ever been able to understand it. Hegnishmen discuss the last match played with the same grave deliberation and relentless attention to detail with which they played it. Other subjects of conversation are the behavior of pet gorkis and the decoration of the local church. Religion and politics are never discussed. It may be that they do not exist, having been reduced to a succession of purely formal events and observances, while their place is filled by the central element, the focus and foundation of Hegnish society, which is best described as the Degree of Consanguinity.

It is a small island, and nearly everybody is related. As it is a monarchy, or rather a congeries of monarchies, this means that almost everybody is or is related to a monarch—is a member of the Royal Family.

In earlier times this universality of aristocracy caused trouble and dissension. Rival claimants to the crown tried to eliminate each other; there was a long period of violence referred to as the Purification of the Peerage, a war called the Agnate War, and the brief, bloody Cross-Cousins' Revolt. But all these family quarrels were settled when the genealogies of every lineage and individual were established and recorded in the great work of the reign of Eduber XII of Sparg, the *Book of the Blood.*

Now four hundred and eighty-eight years old, this book is, I may say without exaggeration, the centerpiece of every Hegnish household. Indeed it is the only book anybody ever reads. Most people know the sections dealing with their own family by heart. Publication of the annual *Addition and Supplements to the Book of the Blood* is awaited as the great event of the year. It furnishes the staple of conversation for months, as people discuss the sad extinction of the Levigian House with the death of old Prince

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Levigvig, the exciting possibility of an heir to the Swads arising from the eminently suitable marriage of Endol IV and the Duchess of Mabuber, the unexpected succession of Viscount Lagn to the crown of East Fob due to the untimely deaths of his great-uncle, his uncle, and his cousin all in the same year, or the re-legitimization (by decree of the Board of Editors-Royal) of the great-grandson of the Bastard of Egmorg.

There are eight hundred and seventeen kings in Hegn. Each has title to certain lands, or palaces, or at least parts of palaces; but actual rule or dominion over a region isn't what makes a king a king. What matters is having the crown and wearing it on certain occasions, such as the coronation of another king, and having one's lineage recorded unquestionably in the *Book of the Blood,* and edging the sod at the first game of the local sutpot season, and being present at the annual Blessing of the Fish, and knowing that one's wife is the queen and one's eldest son is the crown prince and one's brother is the prince royal and one's sister is the princess royal and all one's relations and all their children are of the blood royal.

To maintain an aristocracy it is necessary that persons of exalted rank form intimate association only with others of their kind. Fortunately there are plenty of those. Just as the bloodline of a Thoroughbred horse on my planet can be tracked straight back to the Godolphin Arabian, every royal family of Hegn can trace its ancestry back to Rugland of Hegn-Glander, who ruled eight centuries ago. The horses don't care, but their owners do, and so do the kings and the royal families. In this sense, Hegn may be seen as a vast stud farm.

There is an unspoken consensus that certain royal houses are slightly, as it were, more royal than others, because they descend directly from Rugland's eldest son rather than one of his eight younger sons; but all the other royal houses have married into the central line often enough to establish an unshakable connection. Each house also has some unique, incomparable claim to distinction, such as descent from Alfign the Ax, the semi-legendary conqueror of North Hegn, or a collateral saint, or a family tree never sullied by marriage with a mere duke or duchess but exhibiting (on the ever-open page of the *Book of the Blood* in the palace library) a continuous and unadulterated flowering of true blue princes and processes.

And so, when the novelty of the annual *Addition and Supplements* at last wears thin, the royal guests at the royal parties can always fall back on discussing degrees of consanguinity, settling such questions as whether the son born of Agnin IV's second marriage, to Tivand of Shut, was or was not the same prince who was slain at the age of thirteen defending his father's palace against the Anti-Agnates and therefore could, or could not, have been the father of the Duke of Vigrign, later King of Shut.

Such questions are not of interest to everyone, and the placid fanaticism with which the Hegnish pursue them bores or offends many visitors to the island. The fact that the Hegnish have absolutely no interest in any people except themselves can also cause offense, or even rage. Foreigners exist. That is all the Hegnish know about them, and all they care to know. They are too polite to say that it is a pity that foreigners exist, but if they had to think about it, they would think so.

They do not, however, have to think about foreigners. That is taken care of for them. The Interplanary Hotel on Hegn is in Hemgogn, a beautiful little kingdom on the west coast. The Interplanary Agency runs the hotel and hires local guides. The guides, mostly dukes and earls, take visitors to see

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the Alternation of the Watch on the Walls, performed by princes of the blood, wearing magnificent traditional regalia, at noon and six daily. The Agency also offers day tours to a couple of other kingdoms. The bus runs softly along the ancient, indestructible roads among sunlit orchards and wildfood forests. The tourists get out of the bus and look at the ruins, or walk through the parts of the palace open to visitors. The inhabitants of the palace are aloof but unfailingly civil and courteous, as befits royalty. Perhaps the Queen comes down and smiles at the tourists without actually looking at them and instructs the pretty little Crown Princess to invite them to pick and eat whatever they like in the lunch-orchard, and then she and the Princess go back into the private part of the palace, and the tourists have lunch and get back into the bus. And that is that.

Being an introvert, I rather like Hegn. One does not have to mingle, since one can't. And the food is good, and the sunlight sweet. I went there more than once, and stayed longer than most people do, and so it happened that I learned about the Hegnish Commoners.

I was walking down the main street of Legners Royal, the capital of Hemgogn, when I saw a crowd in the square in front of the old Church of the Thrice Royal Martyr. I thought it must be one of the many annual festivals or rituals and joined the crowd to watch. These events are always slow, decorous, and profoundly dull. But they're the only events there are: and they have their own tedious charm. Soon, however, I saw this was a funeral. And it was altogether different from any Hegnish ceremony I had ever witnessed, above all in the behavior of the people.

They were all royals, of course, like any crowd in Hegn, all of them princes, dukes, earls, princesses, duchesses, countesses, etc. But they were not behaving with the regal reserve, the sovereign aplomb, the majestic apathy I had always seen in them before. They were standing about in the square, for once not engaged in any kind of prescribed ritual duty or traditional occupation or hobby, but just crowding together. as if for comfort. They were disturbed, distressed, disorganized, and verged upon being noisy. They showed emotion. They were grieving, openly grieving.

The person nearest me in the crowd was the Dowager Duchess of Mogn and Farstis, the Queen's aunt by marriage. I knew who she was because I had seen her, every morning at half past eight, issue forth from the Royal Palace to walk the King's pet gorki in the Palace gardens, which border on the hotel, and one of the Agency guides had told me who she was. I had watched from the window of the breakfast room of the hotel while the gorki, a fine, heavily testicled specimen, relieved himself under the cheeseblossom bushes, and the Dowager Duchess gazed away into a tranquil vacancy reserved for the eyes of true aristocrats.

But now those pale eyes were filled with tears, and the soft, weathered face of the Duchess worked with the effort to control her feelings.

"Your ladyship," I said, hoping that the translatomat would provide the proper appellation for a duchess in case I had it wrong, "forgive me, I am from another country, whose funeral is this?"

She looked at me unseeing, dimly surprised but too absorbed in sorrow to wonder at my ignorance or my effrontery. "Sissie's," she said, and speaking the name made her break into open sobs for a moment. She turned away, hiding her face in her large lace handkerchief, and I dared ask no more.

The crowd was growing rapidly, constantly. By the time the coffin was borne forth from the church, there must have been over a thousand people,

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most of the population of Legners, all of them members of the Royal Family, crowded into the square. The King and his two sons and his brother followed the coffin at a respectful distance.

The coffin was carried and closely surrounded by people I had never seen before, a very odd lot—pale, fat men in cheap suits, pimply boys, middle-aged women with brassy hair and stiletto heels, and a highly visible young woman with thick thighs in a miniskirt, a halter top, and a black cotton lace mantilla. She staggered along after the coffin weeping aloud, half-hysterical, supported on one side by a scared-looking man with a pencil mustache and two-tone shoes, on the other by a small, dry, tired, dogged woman in her seventies dressed entirely in rusty black.

At the far edge of the crowd I saw a native guide with whom I had struck up a lightweight friendship, a young viscount, son of the Duke of Ist, and I worked my way toward him. It took quite a while, as everyone was streaming along with the slow procession of the coffin-bearers and their entourage toward the King's limousines and horse-drawn coaches that waited near the Palace gates. When I finally got to the guide I said, "Who is it? Who are they?"

"Sissie," he said almost in a wail, caught up in the general grief—"Sissie died last night!" Then, coming back to his duties as guide and interpreter and trying to regain his pleasant aristocratic manner, he looked at me, blinked back his tears, and said, "They're our commoners."

"And Sissie—?"

"She's, she was, their daughter. The only daughter." Do what he could, the tears would well into his eyes. "She was such a dear girl. Such a help to her mother, always. Such a sweet smile. And there's nobody like her, nobody. She was the only one. Oh, she was so full of love. Our poor little Sissie!" And he broke right down and cried aloud.

At this moment the King and his sons and brothers passed quite close to us. I saw that both the boys were weeping, and that the King's stony face betrayed a superhuman effort to maintain calm. His slightly retarded brother appeared to be in a daze, holding tight to the King's arm and walking beside him like an automaton.

The crowd poured after the funeral procession. People pushed in closer and closer, trying to touch the fringes of the white silk pall over the coffin. "Sissie! Sissie!" voices cried. "Oh, Mother, we loved her too!" they cried. "Dad, Dad, what are we going to do without her? She's with the angels," the voices cried. "Don't cry, Mother, we love you! We'll always love you! Oh Sissie! Sissie! Our own sweet girl!"

Slowly, hampered, almost prevented by the passionate protestations of the immense royal family gathered about it, the coffin and its attendants reached the coaches and cars. When the coffin was slid into the back of the long white hearse, a quavering, inhuman moan went up from every throat. Noblewomen screamed in thin, high voices and noblemen fainted away. The girl in the miniskirt fell into what looked like an epileptic fit, foaming at the mouth, but she recovered quite quickly, and one of the fat, pale men shoved her into a limousine.

The engines of the cars purred, the coachmen stirred up their handsome white horses, and the cortege set off, slowly still, at a foot pace. The crowd streamed after it.

I went back to the hotel. I learned that evening that most of the population of the city of Legners Royal had followed the cortege all the way, six

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miles, to the graveyard, and stood through the burial service and the inhumation. All through the evening, late at night, people were still straggling back toward the Palace and the Royal Apartments, weary, footsore, tearstained.

During the next few days I talked with the young viscount, who was able to explain to me the phenomenon I had witnessed. I had understood that all the people in the Kingdom of Hemgogn were of royal blood, directly related to its (and other) kings; what I had not known was that there was one family who were not royal. They were common. Their name was Gat.

That surname, and Mrs. Gat's maiden name Tugg, went entirely unmentioned in the *Book of the Blood.* No Gat or Tugg had ever married anybody royal or even noble. There was no family legend about a handsome young prince who seduced the fair daughter of the bootmaker. There were no family legends. There was no family history. The Gats didn't know where they came from or how long they had lived in the kingdom. They were bootmakers by trade. Few people in sunny Hegn ever wear boots. As his father had done, and as his son was learning to do, Mr. Gat made dressy leather boots for the Princes of the Watch, and ugly felt boots for the Queen Mother who liked to walk in the smallmeat meadows in winter with her gorkis. Uncle Agby knew how to tan leather. Aunt Irs knew how to felt wool. Great-Aunt Yoly raised sheep. Cousin Fafvig ate far too many grapes and was drunk most of the time. The eldest daughter, Chickie, was a bit wild, though good at heart. And Sissie, sweet Sissie, the younger daughter, had been the kingdom's darling, the Wild Flower of Hemgogn, the Little Common Girl.

She had always been delicate. The story was that she had fallen in love with young Prince Frodig, though he of course could never have married her. It was said they had been seen talking, once, more than once, near the Palace Bridge at twilight. My viscount clearly wanted to believe this but found it difficult, since Prince Frodig had been out of the country, at school in Halfvig, for three years. At any rate, Sissie had a weak chest. "The commoners often do," the viscount said, "it's hereditary. Runs in the female line." She had gone into a decline, grown wan and pale, never complaining, always smiling but so thin and quiet, just faded away, from day to day, until she lay, in the cold cold clay, Sweet Sissie, the Wild Flower of Hemgogn.

And the whole kingdom mourned her. They mourned her wildly, extravagantly, unconsolably, royally. The King had wept at her open grave. Just before they began to shovel in the earth, the Queen had laid on Sissie's coffin the diamond brooch that had come down to her, mother to daughter, for seventeen generations from Erbinrasa of the North, a jewel that no hand had ever touched that was not of the blood of the Erbinnas. Now it lay in the grave of the Little Common Girl. "It was not as bright as her eyes," the Queen said.

I had to leave Hegn not long after this funeral. Other travels absorbed me for three or four years, and when I went back to the Kingdom of Hemgogn the orgy of grief was long over. I looked up my viscount. He had given up playing at being a guide upon coming into his inheritance, the title of Duke of Ist and an apartment in the New Wing of the Royal Palace, with usufruct of one of the Royal Vineyards, which furnished grapes for his parties.

He was a nice young man, with a faint strain of originality in him that had led him to his avocation as a guide; he was actually well disposed toward foreigners. He also had a kind of helpless politeness, which I took advantage of. He was quite incapable of refusing a direct request and so, be-

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cause I asked him to, he invited me to several parties during the month I stayed in Hemgogn.

It was then that I discovered the other subject of conversation in Hegn—the topic that could eclipse sports, gorkis, the weather and even consanguinity.

The Tuggs and the Gats, of whom there were nineteen or twenty at that time, were of inexhaustible, absorbing interest to the royalty of Hemgogn. Children made scrapbooks about them. The Viscount's mother had a cherished mug and plate bearing portraits of "Mother" and "Dad" Gat on their wedding day, surrounded by gilt scrolls. Rather amateurish mimeographed reports of the Common Family's doings and snapshots of them made by the royals of Hemgogn were enormously popular not only throughout the kingdom but also in the neighboring kingdoms of Drohe and Vigmards, neither of which had a family of commoners. The larger neighboring realm to the south, Odboy, had three common families and an actual, living wastrel, called The Old Tramp of Odboy. Yet even there, gossip about the Gats, how short Chickie's skirts were, how long Mother Tugg seethed her underwear, whether Uncle Agby had a tumor or only a boil, whether Auntie and Uncle Bod were going to the seashore for a week in summer or an excursion to the Vigmards Hills in autumn—all this was discussed almost as eagerly in Odboy as in the commonerless kingdoms or Hemgogn itself. And a portrait of Sissie wearing a crown of wildflowers, made from a snapshot that was said to have been taken by Prince Frodig, though Chickie insisted that she had taken it, adorned the walls of a thousand rooms in a dozen palaces.

I met a few royals who did not share the general adoration. Old Prince Foford took rather a liking to me, foreigner as I was. The King's first cousin and my friend the Duke's uncle, he prided himself on his unconventionality, his radical thinking. "Rebel of the Family, they call me," he said in his growly voice, his eyes twinkling among wrinkles. He raised flennis, not gorkis, and had no patience at all with the Commoners, not even Sissie. "Weak," he growled, "no stamina. No breeding. Flaunted herself about under the walls, hoping the Prince'd see her. Caught cold, died of it. Whole lot of 'em sickly. Sickly, ignorant beggars. Filthy houses. Put on a show, that's all they know how to do. Dirt, screeching, flinging pots, black eyes, foul language—all show. All humbug. Couple of dukes in that woodpile, back a generation or two. Know it for a fact."

And indeed, as I took notice of the gossip, the bulletins, the photographs, and of the Commoners themselves as they went about the streets of Legners Royal, they did seem rather insistently, even blatantly lower-class; *professional* is perhaps the term I want. No doubt Chickie had not deliberately planned to be impregnated by her uncle, but when she was, she certainly made the most of it. She would tell any prince or princess with a notebook the woeful tale of how Uncle Tugg had squashed half-rotted grapes into her mouth till she was vomiting drunk and then tore off her clothes and raped her. The story grew with the telling, getting more and more steamy and explicit. It was the thirteen-year-old Prince Hodo who wrote down Chickie's vivid words concerning the brutal weight of Uncle Tugg's hairy body and how even as she fought him her own body betrayed her, her nipples hardening and her thighs parting as he forced his, and here the prince put four asterisks, into her four asterisks. To one of the younger duchesses Chickie confessed that she had tried to get rid of the baby but hot baths were a bunch of crap and Grandma's herbs were a load of shit and you could kill

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yourself with knitting needles. Meanwhile Uncle Tugg went around boasting that the family had always called him Fuckemall, until his brother-in-law, Chickie's putative father (there was a good deal of doubt concerning Chickie's parentage, and Uncle Tugg may well have, in fact, been her father) lay in wait for him, attacked him from behind with a piece of lead pipe, and beat him senseless. The entire kingdom shuddered voluptuously when Uncle Tugg was discovered lying in a pool of blood and urine at the door of the family outhouse.

For the Gats and Tuggs had no plumbing, no running water, no electricity. The previous queen, in a misplaced fit of compassion or noblesse oblige, had had wiring installed in the main house of the ancient, filthy warren of hovels and sheds, called The Commons, where snot-nosed urchins played in gutted automobiles and huge dogs lunged on short chains in endless frenzies of barking, trying to attack Great-Aunt Yoly's mangy sheep that wandered about among the stinking vats of Uncle Agby's tannery. The boys broke all the light bulbs with their slingshots the first day. Gamma Gat would never use the electric oven, preferring to roast her breadfruit in the cavernous woodstove. Mice and rats ate the insulation and shorted out the circuits. The principal result of the electrification of the Commons was a lingering stink of fried rat.

As a rule the Commoners avoided foreigners with blank inattention, just as the royals did. Now and then their patriotic bigotry boiled up and they threw garbage at tourists. Informed of this, the Palace always issued a brief statement of shock and dismay that Hegnishmen should so forget the hospitable traditions of the kingdom. But at the royal parties there was often a little satisfied sniggering and murmurs of "Gave the beggars a bit of their own, eh?" For, after all, tourists were commoners; but they weren't *our* commoners.

Our commoners had picked up one foreign habit. They all smoked American cigarettes from the age of six or seven, and had yellow fingers, bad breath, and horrible phlegmy coughs. Cousin Cadge, one of the fat, pale men I had seen at the funeral, ran a profitable cigarette-smuggling business through his dwarfish son Stumpy, who was employed to clean toilets at the Interplanary Hotel. Young royals often bought cigarettes from Cadge and smoked them in secret, relishing the nausea, the nastiness, the sense of being for a few minutes real vulgarians, genuine scum.

I left before Chickie's baby was born, but royal attention was already centered on the coming event, and was only heightened by Chickie's frequent public announcements that she was sure the little bastard would be a drooling idiot born without any arms or legs or four asterisks, what else could you expect. And the royal families of four kingdoms did not want to expect anything else. Fascinated, appalled, they looked forward to a genetic disaster, a tiny, monstrous plebeian to cluck and sigh and shudder over. I am sure Chickie did her duty and provided them one. ❍

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or

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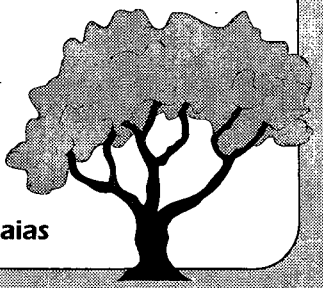

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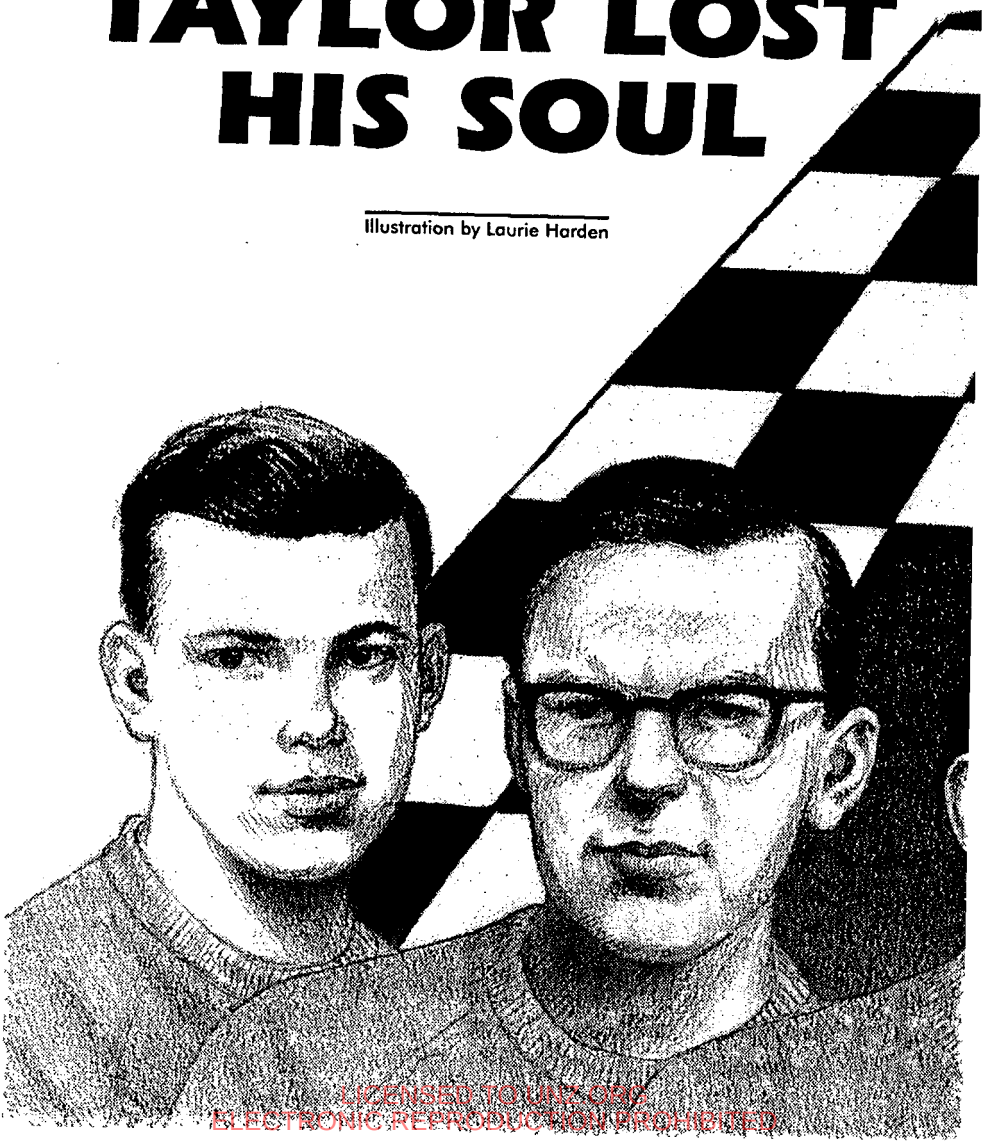

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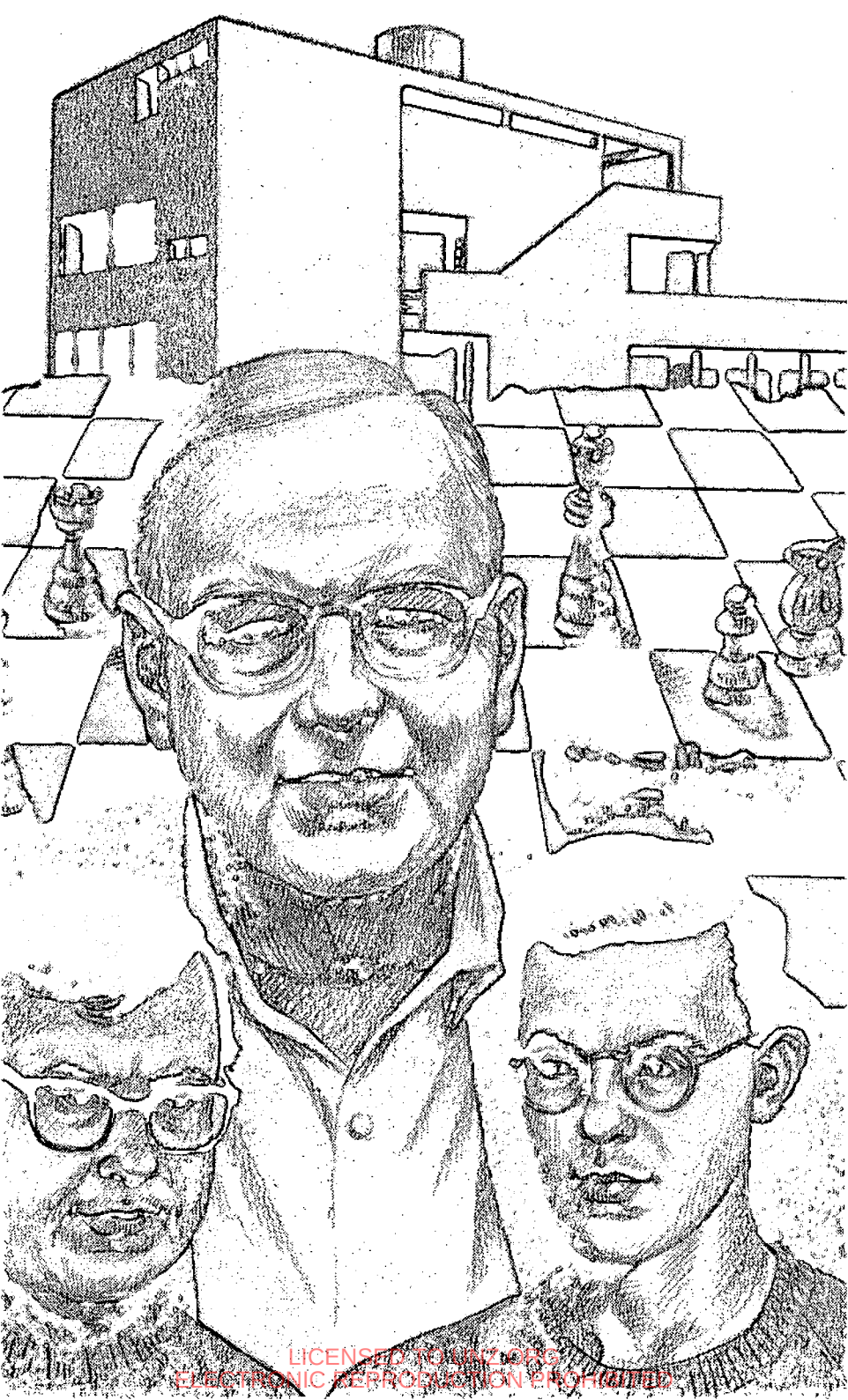

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1.

Josiah Taylor stood in opposition to the waves, his feet planted wide in the sand, hands on hips, lord of all he surveyed. Ezekiel, seated cross-legged on the broad cedar planks of the level-two deck, watched him from above. We're like a sloppily designed nature vs. nurture experiment, he thought. Number One, purely culture; all the rest of us, almost entirely nature.

Among themselves, the clones referred to Josiah as Number One, each with his own inflection. For Ezekiel—Number Two—the inflection was both rueful and ironic: rueful because the designation was accurate; ironic because he knew that their numbering of one another was of a different order than anything that could ever apply to Josiah, since Josiah, having been born with a soul, was the only one of his kind, however chromosomally identical they all were to him. It would be more appropriate for them to call Josiah "the One," or "the Only One." Ezekiel understood that it was just a little fantasy, maybe even a slight rebellion, that they imagined themselves arranged in a hierarchical continuum with him.

Ezekiel watched Josiah stride up the beach, keeping a scarce step or two above the foam line. When he heard the door opening behind him, he knew without looking that it was Daniel. He listened to Daniel lean against the railing as he watched Ezra and Saul, standing in Number One's path some fifty feet up the beach, abruptly end their play with the frisbee to mosey in a roundaboutly discreet path back to the house.

"He's ordinarily so smart and savvy," Daniel said just loudly enough for Ezekiel to hear. "I've told him he's playing with fire, but it makes him laugh with annoyance. The system is foolproof, he says. He thinks. He believes."

And so it would be—if there weren't a weak link in the arrangement. But Daniel, so crisp and perfect in his livery, didn't like to be reminded of that. If the links can be weak, he has told Ezekiel more than once, then the system's not foolproof. An interesting argument for the weak link in question to be making.

"He can't keep away more than a couple of weeks now," Ezekiel said. And of course that drove Numbers Two through Eight wild.

When Number One was in residence, the clones' primary imperative was to keep out of his way unless he requested otherwise. Worse, it reminded them that they might face the unpleasant or the fatal at any moment, a fact that had been forcibly brought home to them since the time a sniper attack had resulted in Jeptha having to give up a kidney and arm for Josiah's use.

"He's said you're to dine with us tonight."

Ezekiel made a sound of derision. "Naturally. Why else would he be *here?*"

Daniel's breath hissed in. He dropped into a crouch and looked directly into Ezekiel's face. "Look. If we're going to do it at all, it's going to have to be this visit. This is our best—maybe our only—shot before he moves into the Washington scene."

Ezekiel peered up the beach at Number One, still moving northward.

The thought of actually doing what they'd talked so long about jolted him as a wave of nausea gripped his stomach, probably triggered by his mod. They'd always agreed that the best moment for the substitution would be after Josiah had stepped down from his CEO-ship and was preparing to take up his Senate seat. Any missteps could then be easily explained by the newness of the situation for him—and would be made before an almost en-

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tirely new set of subordinates and colleagues. But they weren't sure of the doctor yet. And besides . . . Ezekiel didn't feel at all ready. It was so dangerous . . . Ezekiel looked at Daniel. "No," he said. "We can't do it this visit. We can't risk it until we're absolutely sure of the doctor."

Daniel's mouth tightened; his eyes became chilly gray agates boring insistently into Ezekiel's. "We're as sure as we're going to get."

Ezekiel, suddenly cold and sweating, struggled against the urge to retch and vomit. "You're not one of his clones. *You'll* only lose your job and go to prison if we fuck up. Me he'll have killed."

Daniel turned his head to watch Josiah's receding back, and Ezekiel did, too. A dozen waves rolled in before Daniel spoke. "The doctor's not happy," he said. "You see, Josiah's told him to make arrangements for him to take Micah's heart and lungs. Which is the main reason we're here. He's got it scheduled for Tuesday morning."

Micah's heart and lungs? Ezekiel's heart slammed against his chest wall like a fist beating on a locked door. His mouth dried, and his throat closed. "Is he ill?" The sniper attack two years ago had taught them that Josiah's demand for organs could strike at any moment, out of the blue; but they'd always assumed they'd be given advance notice for disease-driven failure.

"Josiah wants Micah's because they're forty-five years younger than his own. And he figures that as long as he's getting the incremental fetal neural stem-cell injections already scheduled, he might as well spruce up the rest of his body while he's at it." Daniel coughed and swallowed, and Ezekiel wondered if he could be as uncomfortable about Micah's death as he looked and sounded. "Which is the reason the doc is upset. He says Josiah is needlessly sacrificing Micah's life."

Though taken aback by the suggestion, Ezekiel responded with the knee-jerk sarcasm everyone who knew him had come to expect. "Ethics getting in the way of loyalty? My, my." His voice came out hoarse and thick rather than light and dry, as he'd intended. But then his tongue felt as if it had swollen and was battling a mouth full of glue.

Though they'd always known Josiah could do anything he wanted with them, the thought that he would end one of their lives under less than life-threatening circumstances shocked Ezekiel. He struggled to clear his throat. "Somehow I have a hard time imagining that cold son-of-a-bitch having granted us the right to life." He couldn't remember Loman ever having addressed so much as a civil greeting to him, much less having shaken his hand or *smiled* at him, of all impossible things. He'd always assumed that the doctor's refusal to acknowledge them as individuals was the necessary corollary of his ethical stance of not regarding any of them as fully human beings.

"Something for you to keep in mind afterward," Daniel said sharply.

The door opened behind them; he sprang lightly to his feet and assumed an aggressive posture. "What the fuck do *you* want?" Saul and Ezra, who obviously had thought Ezekiel was alone, quickly backed off and closed the door. Ezekiel gripped the rough wood railing and levered himself up. "Just how much do they know or guess about you, me, and Josiah?" Daniel said roughly.

"They *know* nothing," Ezekiel said. "No doubt they're full of speculation. Not about anything going on, but about why Josiah 'favors' me, as they put it."

"And me?"

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Ezekiel grinned. "I'm sure they just figure that you're keeping a sharp eye on me, precisely because of Josiah's, ah, interest."

"They're the ones who'll be most likely to figure it all out, you know. They're the ones we have to worry about."

"It won't matter. Nobody will listen to anything any of *us* say." Ezekiel shrugged. "Who can we tell, anyway? You? Loman? VanSant?"

"May I remind you that any halfway thorough medical scrutiny of your body will reveal you're not Josiah." Daniel poked his right index finger hard into Ezekiel's shoulder for emphasis. "It's only because we've got the doc on our side and ready to alter Josiah's records to fit your body that we can hope to pass muster. Which is why there must be no questions raised by Loman on the basis of hints dropped by any of the others."

Ezekiel searched Daniel's face. "I thought you said Loman was on our side?"

Daniel's jaw clenched. "Not Loman, you idiot. Gabriel Gorley. Josiah's doc, not the clones'."

Gorley. Gorley was also Josiah's great-nephew. It seemed unthinkable, that he would consent to plot the death of his own great-uncle just because he disapproved of the sacrifice of a clone whose sole reason for existing was to provide spare parts and compatible organs.

"Gabriel's providing all the mods and implants you need to have uploaded by the time we do it. Which has got to be before the transplant surgery on Tuesday. He's given me a schedule for the order in which they need to be done. The mods I can inject, but the implants he'll have to do. The mods are really crucial, because they'll transform your behavior and physical habits to Josiah's. The implants, of course, will connect you to the Net and give you access to all his power and concerns."

Ezekiel thought of how of all the clones only he had the faintest chance of pulling off the substitution. Not just because he was closest to Number One in age, but because he alone had clandestinely taught himself to read. He had thought when Daniel caught him in the act that he would probably be destroyed as too dangerous to keep alive, but it had been that discovery that had given Daniel the idea for the substitution. Ezekiel took a step back from Daniel. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you about that," he said. "Will the mods make me behave appropriately around women?" Ezekiel had never—except in infancy, of which he had no memory—been in the physical presence of a female, much less interacted socially with one. Since Daniel had first broached the plan to him, he had lain awake many nights worrying about this, certain that if anything exposed him, it would be not his brother clones but his utter lack of experience with women, which in most holodramas was absolutely primary to success in the world at large. They made it obvious that a male's relations with women was what made him a man. He'd always thought that was the reason the clones had never been allowed contact with even one.

Daniel laughed incredulously. "What a ridiculous thing to worry about. Don't give it another thought. There's a mod for that, to begin with. And more importantly, you'll be a US Senator, for godsake. Any way you behave will be fine."

In some ways, Ezekiel thought, Daniel was really really dumb.

None of the clones had had any experience in the world, but they knew from all their holo watching that nothing was more complicated than social interaction. No wonder Daniel had lost so much ground with Josiah during

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the campaign, no wonder Josiah had turned to his political consultants for advice on nearly everything that Daniel used to counsel him on. And Daniel *still* hadn't gotten it.

"Josiah's turned back," Ezekiel said. Number One was a dot on the beach so distant that he could hardly tell which direction the Man was facing.

"If you say so," Daniel said, squinting into the distance. He looked at Ezekiel. "But if you can see him facing us, that means that at least one of us had better go in, or he'll be asking what possible thing we could have had to talk about alone together."

"I'll go," Ezekiel said. There was only a half hour left of the midafternoon free time. And he needed to take something to dull the pain of the terrible sick headache inexorably taking possession of his head. He hoped the first batch of new mods would include a deletion of the loyalty mod. If anything gave him away, it would be his current symptoms.

2.

Ezekiel had never seen Number One in such an easy, expansive mood.

It was simply grand, the Man kept saying, to be free of the constant pressure of business. Politics, he said, was fun and required nothing but good PR skills and advice. The real challenge, he said, would come next, when he used those skills to push his agenda—though for a politician, achieving an agenda was gravy—meaning, above and beyond political survival. No one seeing him could doubt he felt up to the challenge. But then he didn't consider himself a *real* politician, since a real politician desired political survival above all else.

Ezekiel could scarcely choke down dinner. A deep, dread-filled anxiety clawed at his nerves, aggravated by the muted pain of his sick headache. And yet the evening passed as usual.

If the others felt any tension, it was invisible to him. He snatched looks at Gorley every chance he got. How could he trust the man? He hated having only Daniel's judgment to go on. The round of chess and brandy afterward (for everyone but Ezekiel) was as usual. As always he was aware of the irony of the game—of Number One's "curiosity" to test his own educated intelligence against that of his uneducated genetic match twenty years his junior. Though Ezekiel took care to keep it from Number One, his memory—trained by years of illiteracy—far surpassed Number One's, which despite the regular infusion of fresh stem cells seemed intent on deteriorating. "So *this* is how intuitively intelligent I am," Number One would reason whenever Ezekiel beat him—though never stating the corollary, when he beat Ezekiel, that his education must be responsible. Ezekiel had always worried that Number One might find the assurance Loman had always offered him, that illiterate clones could never be intelligent enough to pose any kind of threat to him, absurd in the face of the evenness of their match. But the notion of effective agency without literacy was apparently inconceivable to either of them—however impossible Ezekiel found it to take for granted.

He hadn't felt that learning to read had made him smarter.

An hour after the party had broken up, Daniel came to Ezekiel's room and injected him with the first batch of mods. In the morning, Ezekiel woke with an erection—hard, throbbing, *large*—for the first time since puberty,

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when he had been given a mod to suppress certain sexual functions that Loman had decided shouldn't be taken from the clones permanently lest they and their products might some day be wanted. He enjoyed the erection and the awkward, speedy ejaculation into his underpants. But he was spooked when he caught the first glimpse of himself in the mirror. Changes in his posture and the way he held his eyes and mouth had altered his appearance. For the first time he saw how easy it had always been for Daniel, Loman, and the rest of the staff to tell Number One apart from the clones. The continual renewal of Number One's skin may have cut twenty years from his appearance, making him look Ezekiel's age, but other differences had been more important. Ezekiel realized that he now looked a *lot* like Number One.

But if the change in his appearance disturbed him, the change in the way he *felt* jazzed him, hard, to the brink of hysteria . . . at least at first. For as long as he could remember he had burned with resentment. That resentment had been the reason he had been able to entertain the prospect of committing murder, however uneasily, however vaguely, at all. The plan for doing it had been Daniel's alone, since the loyalty mod had made it impossible for Ezekiel to think of it in concrete, specific terms. But now . . . *now*, the fierce desire for blood surged through his body, pumping angrily through his veins. A voice in his mind began to rail at him that that bastard had it coming, that that bastard had made him a thing and deprived him of a real life and deserved to be kicked out of the way. The world was dog-eat-dog. He had been treated as less than a dog, dog though he truly was. *This* dog was about to have his day.

It was in his blood. It was in his bones. It was in his belly.

And yet even as he felt the bloodlust pumping through his body, a part of him contemplated it with the distance of his old consciousness.

He suspected this self-consciousness wouldn't last. Daniel had enumerated the mods as he'd injected them, and Ezekiel now guessed that the one inspiring his bloodlust was the "CEO-leadership" mod. And he thought that perhaps the sudden flush of sex hormones enhanced the leadership mod, perfusing his emotions with an energy and puissance he usually experienced only in his muscles, sinews, and tendons when his brain flooded his body with a load of endorphins during the extreme physical activity Loman demanded of all the clones.

The scheduler chimed in his ear and instructed him to go to the gym for the morning workout. Ezekiel balked. He had already passed up breakfast. How could he dare to show his face and body to anyone—especially to the rest of the clones—when one look would reveal his difference? He recalled the old Bible story he had been taught as a child. Though clones lacked souls and were thus unable to be saved by Christ, Number One had deemed Bible tuition an important element for their socialization (or indoctrination, as Ezekiel thought of their scant education).

In the story that came now into Ezekiel's mind, the first people, specially created by God (much the way Loman had created the clones from Number One's cells, as second-order creatures made in a human, rather than divine, image), experienced the shame of awareness after having tasted the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, which their maker had explicitly forbidden them to eat. For the first time they noticed they were naked and felt sinful because of it, and suffered a terrible consciousness that their maker could see their disobedience—and their nakedness, as well. Ezekiel felt as though *he* had

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eaten the fruit forbidden by *his* maker, and now needed to hide from his maker's knowing, death-dealing eye. If there were a fig leaf to hide his illegitimately closer resemblance, he would wear it, too, however uselessly.

Loman, of course, would be at the gym, making sure all the equipment was recording their performance. Loman was always in the gym when they were, monitoring their every heartbeat and breath. How else could he continue to publish his studies in the medical journals so avid for the uniquely complete statistics yielded by such a uniquely controlled experiment?

The door slammed open. Judah stood in the doorway, glowering. "What is with you, Number Two?" He took a step into the room. "Loman's got the clock running on you. We'll all be doing extra laps for every minute you're late, damn you."

Loman always made punishment collective. It made sure they'd beat up on the offender and get divisive as hell and never get focused on *him*—or his orders—and thus never even consider the smallest collective rebellion against his authority. "Come on, extra laps are no big deal. The endorphins are always flowing by that time, anyway," Ezekiel said. He watched Judah carefully for signs that he had noticed the differences made by the mods.

Judah gaped at him. "Man, I don't believe you. Are you just going to sit there on your damned lazy ass and argue while the clock runs up? Maybe *you* don't think extra laps are a big deal—"

Ezekiel sprang to his feet and shouldered his way past Judah out the door. Of all things he didn't want Loman to come looking for him. And he certainly didn't want to pass himself off as sick, since doing so would entail the risk that Loman would find traces of the new mods. At least now he had an excuse for looking pissed-off; he supposed that could cover the other differences, too. Everyone—including Loman—would be so focused on his tardiness and its consequences that no one would even *see* anything else—especially if he played his familiar image of resentment to the max.

3.

That evening, when Ezekiel joined the preprandial party in Josiah's den, Number One grinned at Ezekiel and rubbed his hands together with great good humor and glee. "Got quite a workout today, hey boy?" he said as he took the martini from the tray a bot presented to him.

In the past, such remarks might have made Ezekiel grit his teeth even as he made a polite, good-sport rejoinder. But this time Ezekiel's head fairly exploded with a seriously physiological rush of rage. His face flushed a dark, beet red; he had to shove his fists into the pockets of his sweatpants to conceal them.

The fucking asshole had probably watched the entire thing, he thought. God knew every room in the place had monitors just waiting to be activated. Ezekiel couldn't stop himself from imagining the details of Number One's voyeurism.

"Haven't I always said, Walter, that there's nothing like competition—*real* competition—to make a man push the envelope! Without exception, every morning after Zeke and I've played chess, he's far outperformed the other copies. The rest of the time he's just even with them, the lot of them keeping one another steady mediocre company, with that one copy—the youngest one, I can't recall his name, damn it—tending to be best by a hairs-

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breadth." And with Jeptha, now minus a kidney and off-balance with an artificial arm, always coming in last—a difference Number One never chose to acknowledge.

Copies. God he hated that word. He'd always understood the word as insulting, but tonight the insult was intolerable, like cayenne pepper rubbed into a raw, open wound. Daniel suddenly positioned himself between Ezekiel and Number One; Ezekiel saw as he passed that his face had gone a greasy ash-white. His eyes blazed a warning at Ezekiel, and the thought crossed Ezekiel's mind that if Number One provoked him into attacking right in front of Loman, not only would Daniel and Gorley have no choice but to intercept him—but Loman would, after rendering his body a corpse, without doubt conduct on it the most thorough autopsy known to medical science.

Ezekiel glanced at Gorley without making eye contact. He could detect no concern in his demeanor. Gorley looked simply interested, in his usual detached fashion.

Daniel spoke quickly, presumably to cut off Number One's usual lecture. "Didn't you say once, Dr. Loman, that you'd established a correlation between the phases of the moon and the clones' performance?"

Daniel pronounced the word *clones* without emphasis, but Ezekiel understood it as a sop offered up to his raging hormones—and a plea to him to keep himself under control. He was certain that both Daniel and Gorley could see all the differences in him. Though he knew he should be relieved that Loman and Number One did not, he was instead enraged at their inability to see past their image of him as a "copy."

He managed somehow to keep quiet, taking care to speak only when they wanted him to. But he fumed silently as he watched the three of them sip their way through two cocktails apiece; and then, at dinner, he picked desultorily at the food that differed so much from theirs, since eating with them did not mean sharing their table. There had always been the one, the only important lesson, repeated again and again and again: distinctions and differences were for other people; the clones—or *copies*—were all simply alike, with only the most minor differences, certainly none significant enough to make them true individuals in any way distinct from one another.

"The boy's off his feed, Walter, for the second night running," Number One said, giving Ezekiel an unusually sharp look over the rim of his wine glass.

Ezekiel was aware of them all staring at him, of Daniel's concern that Loman might be prompted to do a work-up of his blood, of Gorley's and Loman's interest in this show of *temperament.* As though I was some damned specimen wriggling on a slide under the microscope, Ezekiel thought. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he jabbed his fork into a shiny green spinach leaf and a chunk of pale, sesame-flavored tofu; keeping his face carefully blank, he put the bite into his mouth and doggedly chewed and swallowed.

Methodically he repeated the performance, and Loman and Number One lost interest. The table chat turned to the tenderness of the veal Marsala *they* were eating. Meat, of course, was too unhealthy for the copies to have so much as tasted even once in their lives, given their sole *raison d'être.* Loman had once said that having never eaten meat, any clone who tasted it would probably get sick with its richness. Ha ha ha. It seemed that the new Senator would have to convert to vegetarianism and forswear liquor and cigars. More things to give him away, Ezekiel thought acidly. That and not knowing how to button a shirt or knot a tie. Or speak to a woman.

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He grew aware of Daniel watching him covertly but intently. Of course. *Daniel* would button his shirt for him and mediate all his contacts with women. He would be Daniel's puppet—or so Daniel hoped. Which was what was in the conspiracy for Daniel.

Ezekiel had always understood this in some vague sense, but the enormity of it was only now, that the mods were changing him, becoming apparent. In less than twenty-four hours he had passed from an innocent longing for freedom to a detailed conniving for power. He didn't know who he was anymore.

Ezekiel snatched a look at Gorley's face as he poured more Medoc into his gleaming crystal goblet. And the good doctor? What was in it for *him?* Now *that* was something to worry about, whether Daniel admitted it or not. There was something too smooth and greedy about him. Something too well-fed and satisfied. Ezekiel thought it would be easier to believe that an ethical crisis could make someone like Loman revolt against the status quo than that it could move someone like Gorley.

"Eat up, boy," Number One said. "You're going to need all your wits about you for tonight's match, I guarantee you." Ezekiel looked up from his food to find Number One watching him with a quizzical—even thoughtful—attention. Such attention, given his sense of walking a tightrope that was now fifty rather than the usual five feet from the ground, sharpened Ezekiel's concentration. As Ezekiel made eye contact with him, a cold, bright light had begun to dance in Number One's eyes. A strange thought came into Ezekiel's mind, the thought that the entire conspiracy could be Number One's fabrication and manipulation for cheap (if complicated) amusement. Just to see what the difference might be with the mods—as an additional inquiry into distinguishing nature from nurture. Oh, how Number One loved his games. And it was just the sort of thing Loman would salivate over, enabling him to go an unprecedented step better than the sparse twin-study investigations of mods. He could imagine them cooking it up between them, and Daniel playing along, as he always played along with whatever Number One chose to do.

Never taking his icily brilliant eyes off Ezekiel, Number One dabbed his napkin to his lips and winked. The world was his damned oyster, Ezekiel thought. He couldn't imagine himself ever feeling that way. *That* was a difference nothing could change, mods or no. Such an attitude could only be accreted over a lifetime of a certain kind of experience, not acquired biochemically.

Even now, Ezekiel felt like the soulless monkey Loman had taught him to despise and mistrust—a monkey that now knew how to look human, but underneath, below the surface appearance, was as soulless as ever.

4.

The next afternoon, following the clones' last workout of the day, Ezekiel drew the number-seven ball from the box of numbered balls they used to determine the order in which they would take their showers. Jonathan had drawn the number-eight ball. Since the water heater could accommodate only six showers before the water ran cold, they agreed to swim a few laps and sweat out the remaining time in the sauna.

Tired as he was, Ezekiel managed only six laps; in a spirit of (off-the-

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record) competition augmented by the advantage of youthfulness, Jonathan went eight. When Jonathan climbed out of the pool, the two clones so widely different in age grinned at one another.

They knew it would drive Loman crazy to know they'd done exercise that had gone unrecorded; and they knew that their will to compete was far stronger when their performances went unmonitored.

In the sauna they stretched out on their backs on the benches made of the same cedar planks that had been used to construct the house's decks. Ezekiel closed his eyes and was glad to submit to the heat as it pounded him into a relaxation his body had since Friday night so strenuously resisted. He was glad it was Jonathan he'd drawn to hang out with. Somehow, despite the difference in their ages, Jonathan's easy temperament and sweetness complemented Ezekiel's sharp and edgy attitude.

Jonathan's voice broke into Ezekiel's pleasantly heavy vacancy. "Man, what's gotten into you?"

Ezekiel's eyes snapped open. The heat, something about the heat, had given him the beginning of a hard-on. And he had been so relaxed he'd forgotten to be cautious. Quickly he rolled onto his side, to block Jonathan's view. The very possibility of an erection should be so unlikely as to make whatever Jonathan had seen seem a product of his own imagination—or so Ezekiel hoped.

"I mean, you almost lost it with Loman *twice* today. I thought you were actually going to pop him when he made that crack about how your being Number One's pet cut no ice with him."

Ezekiel smiled to himself with relief. Jonathan had seen nothing.

A burst of affection made him wish he could take Jonathan with him. Jonathan knew the best in him, as no one else did (or could). Ezekiel knew that Jonathan worried about his temper not because he feared collective punishment, but because he cared about Ezekiel himself. "It's been really tough," Ezekiel said. "It's like Number One never lets up. Like he's pushing to see just how much shit I'll take from him." Already the sweat was running down his face and body and soaking his hair. Utterly enervated, he flopped again onto his back.

"It was kind of weird, Loman coming out to the beach to tell you that Number One wanted you to work out alongside him."

The clones were used to having to move out to the beach when Number One wanted to work out. That was nothing new. But everything was different now for Ezekiel. His hands had actually clenched into fists when Loman had told them to clear out of the gym because Number One wanted to use a weight machine. Loman, taken aback at seeing his body assume an aggressive stance, had dared him to "tempt" him. Jonathan's grip on one arm and Micah's grip on the other had chilled him, since he knew that whatever Loman might do to him, the rest would receive collective punishment as well.

"I mean, he's never wanted you to work out with him before, has he?"

Ezekiel tried to imagine what it might be like, coming back to the compound as Number One. It would probably be better that he not. Daniel said there was no way he could free the clones from their captivity after he'd taken Josiah's place. The clones had no independent legal identity. Releasing them would be illegal—like releasing elephants or tigers into the world—and dangerous to his own well-being, since if he could substitute himself for Josiah, so could one of them substitute himself for Ezekiel. But if Ezekiel did return to visit the compound, would he be tempted to take

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"companionship" from the clones—tempted to play power games with someone whose life was in his hands? And if, say, he singled out Jonathan, wouldn't Jonathan sense who he really was?

"Okay, Zeke. So you don't want to talk. I can understand that, I guess. But look, you've got to get control of your anger, you know? Because it's way dangerous not to, man, you do know that. And you seem to be getting more and more angry with every visit he makes here. I just thought talking about it might help, to let you vent, you know?"

The timer went off, and the men staggered to their feet to escape the heat. It wouldn't matter what the temperature of the hot water was; Ezekiel was only interested in using the cold.

5.

Thirty-one hours later, exactly to plan, Gabriel Gorley released the lock on Ezekiel's door, and Ezekiel, silent and rushed with adrenaline, followed him up the stairs to his level-four room.

Gorley passed him a drug dot. "It's from Loman's cabinet," he said.

"Is it. . . ?" Ezekiel thought he saw a kind of dry amusement in Gorley's eyes, but the inappropriateness of amusement made him doubt his own reading.

Gorley said, "Yes, it's the stuff he keeps for putting down you clones."

Ezekiel's queasiness fell away under a violent, stiffening surge of emotion. *Bastard.* He meant all of them—not just Number One, not just Loman, but Daniel and Gorley, too.

Gorley said, "You know what comes next. So let's do it."

Ezekiel chewed on his lip and skated his gaze over Gorley's young, tense face. "Uh, I wonder if we could go over it again?" Ezekiel's voice was hesitant and a little hoarse. "Just so I can be sure I've got it right?"

Gorley's look was scathing. "I'd have thought those mods would have given you some balls." His eyes narrowed. "Or is it smarts that's lacking?"

The old illiteracy thing—though surely Daniel must have told him he could read . . . Ezekiel cleared his throat. "I just want to be sure."

Gorley, not quite patiently, walked him one last time through the plan. When he finished, he gestured Ezekiel to the door.

"Just one more question," Ezekiel said.

Gorley stared critically at him. "You've got cold feet." His lips curled into a tight, contemptuous smile. "A little late for that, considering what you've got inside your head. Back out now, and we'll have to finger you, since there's no way you can lead the clone's life without its being discovered."

"I have no intention of backing out," Ezekiel said with pronounced dignity. "I just want to be sure of you. I want to know what your real reason for doing this is. Daniel said ethical, but that makes no sense, given what we're about to do."

"What *you're* about to do, with Daniel and me as accessories."

The look in Gorley's eye had lost all trace of amusement; he seemed to be weighing Ezekiel. Finally he said, "What the hell. You'll know eventually. The truth is, I did my damnedest to help Josiah lose the election. Partly for the money, but mostly because his business practices and politics are helping to destroy the last chance we have of saving the planet from environmental ruin. As Josiah, you'll have a conversion, a mellowing, a coming to

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awareness of the public good. And I'll be the man pulling the strings." His eyes narrowed. "Since I'll be the one man able to finger you if you cross me."

So each of his co-conspirators thought he would be the one to be pulling the new senator's strings? Obviously Daniel hadn't a clue to Gorley's ambitions, Ezekiel thought, or he'd consider him a threat to his own.

"And now, shall we get this little tea party over with?"

The two of them went out into the dim, shadowy hall. When Gorley lightly tapped his fingernail against Daniel's door, Daniel opened at once and joined them. Noiselessly they moved up the stairs to Number One's suite. Gorley looked at Daniel, as though he thought it was Daniel's role to override the lock. Daniel simply waited. After a few seconds, Gorley, grimacing, put his palm to the door plate and held his ID signet to the laser reader.

Now it was on record that Gorley had visited the room.

Once inside, the three of them went quickly to work on the heavily drugged Josiah. Ezekiel placed the patch near (but not on) Josiah's carotid artery while Gorley accessed the communications relay in Josiah's implant and Daniel the communications relay in the implant Gorley had installed the night before at the base of Ezekiel's skull. On Gorley's signal, he and Daniel switched Ezekiel's relay on and Josiah's transmitter off. Although it was impossible for them to make the switch without a hiccup, they achieved sufficient simultaneity that the security monitor registered only a slight power fluctuation and thus did not trigger the various alarms in its deploy.

The rest went quickly—stripping Josiah's body of his pajamas and dressing it in clone sweats; crudely shearing the body's hair to match Ezekiel's; lugging the body down to Ezekiel's room and laying it out on the bed; returning to Josiah's room where Gorley administered the last batch of mods and Daniel gave Ezekiel a quick tour of the room and Josiah's security and identification routines and accouterments; Ezekiel's copying, with Daniel's assistance, all the data stored in Josiah's implant; Daniel's substituting the already prepared tapes for the hall and stairwell monitors.

But when Gorley said they must review the instructions for the morning's transplant surgery, he found that both Daniel and Ezekiel opposed going through with it.

"We have no choice but to go through with it," Gorley said. "If we don't, we'll arouse Loman's suspicions."

Daniel disagreed. "So Josiah's changed his mind. That's a prerogative Loman's amply familiar with."

For the first time, Ezekiel thought about how the other clones would feel when they heard that Number One had put him—Ezekiel—to death on an apparent whim or expenditure of temper. He wished he could spare them the fear and pain that would cause; he told himself it was something, anyway, that he could spare them Micah's death.

Gorley insisted. "The surgery is the best cover in the world. He'll have been given general anesthesia; and I'll be injecting new neural stem cells into his brain, as well as skin cells into his face. All incongruities and lapses perpetrated by Zeke will be automatically attributable to consequent loss of memory and mental disorientation."

Daniel frowned at Gorley for several tense, silent seconds. "I don't get it, Gabriel. I thought you were absolutely aghast at the prospect of sacrificing a clone life for frivolous reasons. Surely the injection of new neural cells would be sufficient screen to explain any discrepancies."

Gorley's face flushed dark red. "All *right,*" he said, fairly snarling. "But

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without the transplant, attention's going to be on Josiah having put down Ezekiel—his favorite, for Christ's sake—without warning. Are you prepared for *that?*"

Daniel looked at Ezekiel. "Don't worry about it, Josiah. No one ever second-guesses you. Because they wouldn't dare."

Ezekiel shivered. No one would ever question Number One's right to kill any or all of his clones. Ezekiel looked in the mirror.

His life as Ezekiel was over. *He* was Number One now, and Josiah had become Number Two. To all intents and purposes, Ezekiel was dead. And he, Number One, was his murderer.

6.

Alone at last in Josiah's suite, Ezekiel walked about in a daze, touching everything he looked at, as an infant would. He felt newborn. He could hardly take it in. He had achieved freedom.

Freedom from Loman's tyranny, freedom from Josiah's caprice, freedom to leave the compound for the first time in his life.

Freedom to find out who he might be, middle-aged though he was.

He could hardly take it in. But then there was no time for doing so now. He had to be ready for whatever might come next, or freedom would have been nothing more than a brief illusion.

At seven in the morning, Daniel arrived with a tray of coffee to wake Ezekiel. Ezekiel did not, of course, want the coffee, although as Josiah, no longer intending to undergo surgery, he would be expected to require it. Nor had Ezekiel needed waking. He had spent the hours since the murder exploring Josiah's private Net site and the data files that had been copied from Josiah's implant to his own.

Daniel used electric clippers to shear Ezekiel's hair close to the scalp and then quickly and deftly manicured his fingernails.

"Are you ready for all the contingencies we discussed?" Daniel asked, watching him closely. "You look really, really stressed, you know."

"Not like *he* ever looked?"

Daniel went to the closet and pulled out a pair of jeans and a plaid flannel shirt, the clothes Josiah considered most appropriate for visits to the compound. "That last batch of mods make the resemblance uncanny. Your tone of voice just now . . ." His gaze met Ezekiel's. "If I didn't know, I'd never guess."

"He'd be the one most interested in the resemblance—other than Loman, of course."

"Get dressed, Josiah." Daniel's voice was sharp. "I'm phoning Loman now to let him know you're calling off the transplant."

Ezekiel thought of Micah, spending the hours after midnight fasting and thirsty, believing it would be his last night on earth. Better *him* than Micah, he could not stop himself from thinking, aware that he was rationalizing—and feeling like Josiah for even thinking it.

Daniel accompanied him to the clinic. Gorley looked annoyed when he saw that Ezekiel wasn't alone. "Well, nephew," Ezekiel said in exactly Josiah's style.

Gorley started; he stared at Ezekiel as though he weren't sure just who he was. "I have to shave your head for the procedure," he said curtly.

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Under Daniel's watchful eye, Ezekiel submitted to the razor, but told Gorley that Daniel had arranged for them all to fly out to DC very early the next morning. "There's no point in staying around here, and I'd like to let the new staff there know I'm not a predictable boss and am likely to surprise them."

The door chimed as Gorley was swabbing Ezekiel's scalp with something cold and wet. "Open," Gorley said, and Loman came in.

"Good morning, sir," Loman said to Ezekiel. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but this is important."

Ezekiel made the gesture Josiah would have made; a surge of exaltation flooded his body as the full import of Loman's humility and diffidence struck him. "What is it, Walter?"

"It's about the removal of Ezekiel's body, sir." Ezekiel had never seen the doc looking so nervous and uncomfortable. "You've always said I'd be able to do postmortems on them. Sir, on Jerry VanSant's instructions, the maintenance staff has already taken the body to be cremated. I'd appreciate it if you'd tell Jerry to have the body returned."

"Sorry, Walter," Ezekiel said shortly, staring down at his Josiah-perfect fingernails and laser signet ring. "I changed my mind. And frankly, I'd really prefer not to discuss that copy at all."

Loman looked devastated. "But my research, sir! I—"

"Case closed," Ezekiel said.

"I'm sure Uncle has his reasons," Gorley drawled as he snapped some kind of medbot into the arm of Ezekiel's chair and positioned it over Ezekiel's skull. "But whatever they are, they're certainly disrespectful of the legitimate claims of science."

Ezekiel caught a faint emphasis on the word *Uncle* and stiffened.

"Daniel, will you walk Walter over to the gym? I'd like a private word with Gabriel before we begin the procedure." Ezekiel swung the bot away from his chest to keep it from confining his shoulder.

Daniel shot him a look of warning and alarm. Ezekiel nodded at Daniel. "Just a few minutes," he said.

"I'll do my best to reason with him, Loman," Gorley said as the two men obediently left the room.

An anger that was strange and new in its iciness thrilled Ezekiel with its gratifyingly delicious power; he imagined his eyes pouring out an invisible substance as powerful as the fictional ice-nine.

"Do you think I'm surprised to hear you're hoping to stop the cremation in time?"

Gorley tried to smile. "It was a joke, Zeke. I just—"

"Don't call me that again," Ezekiel said. "Unless you're prepared to play that hand to the end."

Gorley's eyebrows shot up in angry astonishment. "Don't push me, asshole. All it takes is one call to air a suspicion, and you're dead meat for having murdered not only a real human being but your owner."

Ezekiel's entire body had shifted into a state he'd never before experienced, a state as new as the erection had been Saturday morning. He realized he was enjoying the confrontation. He spoke in an easy, confident voice. "And then Daniel gets fingered. And you, too."

"Nope. *I* don't get fingered for anything."

"I see you've got it all worked out." Ezekiel smiled. "Deleting your override of my lock from the house computer's log was easy. But maybe you

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don't realize the trouble you'll be making for yourself if you wait until after cremation to spring the trap."

Gorley tore the sterile wrapping off a tray of instruments and grabbed a scalpel. He looked totally unnerved. "What a shame that when I discovered you weren't my patient you fought me and lost," he said.

Ezekiel realized he should not have remained seated; it hadn't occurred to him Gorley would react with such desperation. "Poor Gabriel," he said, leaning back as though to relax. "The fact is, you'll never be able to back up the claim that you just now discovered I'm not Josiah. Remember, the medical records—made by you—are mine, not Josiah's."

Gorley stepped so close that Ezekiel got a strong whiff of his pleasantly spicy cologne. "Wrong. I've saved the old ones and will overwrite the substitutions before I call Loman."

Ezekiel kept his eye on the scalpel, now inches from his face.

"Better check your private cache before you kill me, nephew. Because Josiah knew about it. He had one of his companies' hackers get all your codes for him. And he kept a memo about it in his own private cache, so that he could remind himself if he ever happened to lose his biological memory of it. When I saw that, I used the codes he kept in his cache to monitor your doings."

"You're bluffing." Gorley's face shone with sweat, and his voice shook. "Playing for time won't do you any good, Zeke. Daniel's just an errand boy. He doesn't *do* decisions. Which is why he's not about to come charging back in here and save you."

"I know from your cache that you didn't work against Josiah's campaign," Ezekiel said. "You're Josiah's primary heir. And it's Josiah's estate that you're after. You've planned all along to kill me—though your plan was to remove my heart and lungs for the transplant and then 'discover' I wasn't Josiah and take me off the pump; and then let Daniel take the fall, pitting his lackey word against your professional one. Probably you were hoping he'd claim you'd spied for your uncle's opponents, which would prove to be false and give you greater credibility than him. Well, we did record your claiming that. But I know your real reason was the money. It's obvious from his files that Josiah wasn't too sympathetic about your investment losses. I guess you didn't realize that the first thing I'd do on getting access to Josiah's communication site would be to check out everything to do with you and Daniel." Heedless of the scalpel's dangerous proximity, Ezekiel pointed a finger in Gorley's face. "Kill me, and you finger yourself," he said. "Daniel not only wired me to record my conversation with you in your room, he kept copies of all the surveillance tapes we doctored last night."

Gorley threw the scalpel against the wall and cursed.

The contest was over. Ezekiel decided to wait to tell him he'd pay him something for his trouble. He didn't want this "nephew" thinking he might be susceptible to blackmail.

7.

"My only question," Ezekiel said privately to Daniel later, "is why Gorley was so surprised, even after he had made me almost indistinguishable neurochemically from Josiah. I mean, it's not like I hadn't been given the behavioral modifications to override any significant environmental influences."

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"Oh, I understand that," Daniel said. "It's hard, after always having had a certain idea about a person, to think that changes in their circumstances will be so significant. He never really started thinking of you as having become Josiah. If he had, he might have been able to anticipate your final moves."

Chess had always characterized his relationship with Josiah. This was the last game, ever, for Ezekiel. He—Number One, now—had to forget the one who had been known as Number Two and leave him behind.

It was that one, the one known as Number Two, who deserved mourning. Josiah, after all, lived on.

8.

Every time Number One looked in the mirror, he wondered what it was like to have a soul. Did it make everything about you different—how you experienced the world, how you felt, what you did? He'd always thought that being without a soul made him somehow hollow, like an onion with only layers of skin and no real kernel at the core. His bones were Josiah's, their cells and neurons identical. He understood that the possession of a soul was a spiritual thing, beyond behavior—since mods controlled most of that—beyond, even, emotions. Would anyone, seeing him, realize that hollowness?

Would they wonder about him—wonder whether maybe he wasn't really a full human—or wonder how Josiah Taylor had lost his soul?

Those who knew him well might make the connection with the moment Josiah Taylor had killed his oldest clone. Number One knew that he always would. O

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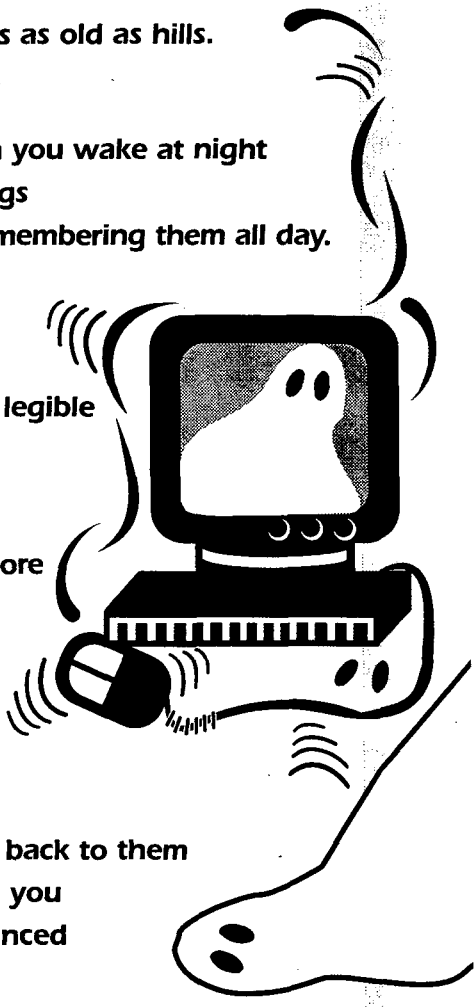
TECHNOGHOSTS

Older ghosts still haunt in ways as old as hills.

They show up in your dreams
They shape the shadows when you wake at night
They catch your thought in rings
So you go round and round remembering them all day.
Good ways
Attention commanding ways
But not the only ways
And sometimes not as clear or legible
Or savable to your hard disk
As might be wished.

The recently dead more and more
Will send you email.

Avengeme@hamlet.gov.dk
Istillhateyou@gotohell.com
And suchlike return addresses
Keep showing on your server
Although when you try to get back to them
To tell them to stop spamming you
Your message always gets bounced
By the mailing demon
As undeliverable,
So you go on getting electronic commands from them.



Then again, some of them fax.

—Ruth Berman

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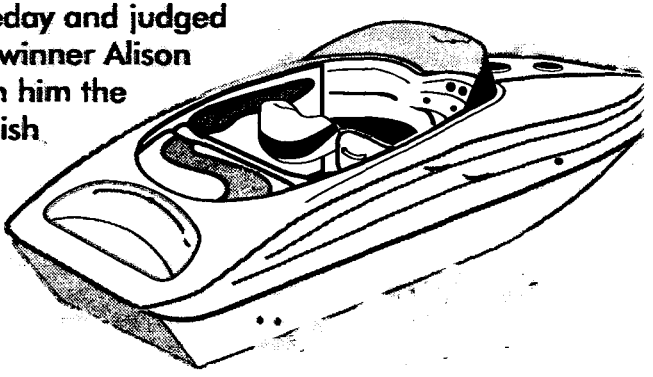
James Sarafin

DOWNRIVER

James Sarafin's fiction has appeared in *Asimov's, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, F&SF, Science Fiction Law Journal,* and *VB Tech Journal*. His fantasy/crime story in the July 1995 issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's,* "The Word for Breaking August Sky," won a national contest sponsored by Nan A. Talese/Doubleday and judged by Pulitzer-prize winner Alison Lurie. It also won him the 1996 Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for best first mystery story.



The porch of Ed's fishing and hunting lodge stayed cool in the afternoon shade from the big cottonwoods on the riverbank. For days there hadn't been a cloud in the sky, and the relentless sub-arctic sun had left the river in high flood. Glacial meltwater the color of coffee with cream overflowed the banks to within yards of the lodge, carving a new channel that disappeared into the dense boreal forest downstream. Branches, logs, even entire foliated trees swept by in the fast, slick current.

"I never seen the river this high in June," Ed told me. "Reminds me of break-up."

I shrugged. "I don't know." None of us who were supposed to be his guests dared to start an argument with him, but I could come closer than the Germans, who couldn't even open their mouths without setting him off. The spring thaw had caused a flood all right, but the river had been jammed with broken ice that cracked and boomed in the rushing current.

"Almost exactly, Stevie," he insisted. "Just without the ice."

I went by "Steve"; the "Stevie" was just to let me know I had stepped close to the line. But I didn't want to talk anyway, just to listen. The air was filled with an electric hum that seemed to grow louder daily with the approaching summer solstice. I had noticed that when I sat very still and listened the hum would separate into its components: the rush of the river, the whir of a million insect wings, the faint creak and rustle of the burgeoning trees, grass, and lupine along the river bank. Plus some mysterious, unidentifiable high-pitched vibration, almost beyond the edge of hear-

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ing, like some residual cosmic hum. Maybe the sound of the earth itself giving back the excess sunlight, or of the sun's petroleum-bound energy leaking back to the surface.

Ed seemed content to take the day off from the usual routine of gathering food, collecting firewood, and fortifying the lodge, which was fine with me. We sat and watched the river go by, waiting for the sun to swing around and drive off some of the bugs. Mosquitoes formed squadrons downwind in the slight breeze and attacked in waves, too many at once to slap them all. The flies mostly focused on the king salmon filets drying in racks on the bank. Two days before, we'd boated down the Yentna River, which drained a good part of the southwestern Alaska Range, to go fishing at a clearwater tributary. Caught at least fifty king salmon with a seine—then Ed had parked himself on the porch while the Germans and I filleted them. Catching that many fish, and with a net, would have been illegal in the old days, and maybe still was, technically, according to some federal regulation.

I didn't think Ed had been very careful about fish and game laws even before the fighting between Alaskans and the federal government over oil and gas left the political arena. For the past year, though, the Feds had been busy trying to explain and clean up their "accident," after their attack helicopters had tried to stop the First Alaskan Militia from hijacking a tanker loaded with sixteen million gallons of liquefied natural gas from the new pipeline. No one knew for sure which side had ignited the tanker, but the resulting fireball released as much energy as a small nuclear explosion, enough to fry most of Anchorage, along with some 40 percent of the population of the state. Including the only thing I'd had left to care about.

The only reason it hadn't fried me too was that a few friends had talked me into going on a fishing trip. And now, sitting there on the porch of Ed's lodge, I realized we were approaching the first anniversary—a year of surviving out here on our own.

I tried to read an old fishing magazine. When the sun came full on the porch, a swarm of biting gnats clocked in for the mosquitoes; but I hardly felt anything that bit me anymore. The afternoon dragged as the sun slowly wheeled around to the northwest and dropped, like a duck landing into a stiff wind, behind the trees across the river. It must have been almost ten o'clock, and the mosquitoes had come back with the evening cool, when I heard a metallic booming echoing down around the bend of the river.

A high-sided aluminum jetboat, maybe eighteen feet long, came drifting powerless around the bend, the booming sound caused as its hull slammed into the standing waves on the near side of the bend. Ed and I both sat up. We hadn't seen any river traffic all year. Sometimes I thought about going up or downriver to find other people . . . but Ed kept his boats chained and locked up.

The jetboat looked empty as it swung past the lodge. I noticed Ed's eyes darting side to side, as if trying to see at either edge of his vision the opposing outcomes of a choice he had to make. I knew that look, had first seen it last June, when he was trying to decide what to do about us, his guests, after realizing that the pilot wasn't coming back to pick us up and we wouldn't be able to pay for our lodging anymore. Right now he was calculating whether salvaging the jetboat might be worth the expenditure of gasoline and effort.

"Let's go check it out." Ed stood up. He wore his usual camo fatigues and scuffed black combat boots, and he slid his pistol along the web belt to the

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side of his hip, from where he had moved it to keep it from rubbing against the chair. That single-action .44 Magnum and the rifle he kept locked up in his cabin were the two big reasons no one argued with him.

I untied the skiff's bowline while Ed unlocked the chain with one of the keys he kept on his belt and then stepped back to the stern. It took several pulls for the seldom-used outboard to sputter to life. I shoved off and the bow swung out into the broad current. It felt good to be out and moving on the river again. We raced after the jetboat, and Ed cut the motor as soon as he knew we'd come alongside. The last echoes of the outboard died away and the only sound was the hiss of the silt-laden water against the metal hulls of the two boats.

As we came alongside, I noticed the bullet holes, three in the side of the jetboat's hull and another that had spider-webbed the middle of the windshield. The deck was awash in the stern with the thin red of blood mixed with water. A man's arm lay up across the inboard motor housing; I didn't need to see the rest of him to know that he had been dead for a couple days. The swarm of fat black flies and sour smell of spoiled meat left no doubt.

"I'll be damned," Ed said. "Wonder if he's got any gas left in the tanks?"

He had me drop anchor while he held on to the other boat. The anchor swung us around, bows upriver; through the line I could feel it bump, bump, bumping along the bottom. It was a plenty big anchor for one boat, not quite enough for two, and took awhile to catch good enough to hold both boats against the current.

"See if there's anything up front," he told me. The bloody water sloshed over my boots as I put my weight into the other boat. Forward of the windshield was an enclosed bow, open below the dash but covered with a plastic tarp. I started to pull the tarp free, then jumped back as it moved on its own.

Good thing I did, because this wicked-looking machete cut the air right where my leg had been. "Look out!" I must have yelled it to myself, because Ed was still in our own boat. I backed up another step as the blade slashed out further, held by a scrawny little arm.

The tarp had come clear of the bow enclosure, since I'd hung onto it while backing up, and now I could see more of who was doing the slashing: another scrawny arm, held across a pair of folded-up bare legs, just as skinny, long, scraggly hair, pale, oval face—

"Come on out, girl," I said. "We won't hurt you."

"Girl?" Ed said, standing up in the stern, while still holding onto the gunnel of the jetboat.

Her head darted around like a cornered hare's; but she had nowhere to go, hunched up like that in the bow. It took quite a bit of our coaxing before she finally unlimbered those legs and stood up on the deck, holding the machete in line with my belt buckle. She couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen, and had on an outfit that only a kid would wear in the Alaska bush: dirty sweatshirt, pair of shorts, pair of rubber thonged sandals. She didn't even wince as the bloody water seeped between her naked toes.

"Where did you come from?" I said, as much to break the silence as out of curiosity.

She licked her lips, which looked cracked and chapped. "Skwentna."

"You drifted all the way down from Skwentna?" Ed said. "Without power? And him dead like that?"

She shrugged at his first question, again more tautly at the second, then

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just gave him a "so what" glare. Skwentna was a little settlement more than twenty miles upriver—if she'd drifted all that way, it was a miracle some rock or fallen tree hadn't upset the boat. But the high water might have actually helped by floating her over most of the snags.

"Who's he?" Ed jerked a thumb toward the stern of the jetboat.

"My stepdad," she said.

"So what happened to him?"

"There was a big fight at the general store."

"The Feds?"

"No, another group, some families. . . . We tried to get away with some food, but the motor quit and then they shot him, too." She licked her lips again, which I wanted to tell her would just make them crack worse. "Like, they'd already killed everybody else in our group."

Like . . . I tried to stop the memories from coming back.

"Go on, take a look up there," Ed was saying, gesturing toward the bow. I kept one eye on that machete as I looked, in case she took offense. But there wasn't anything but a mildewy sleeping bag, some ragged clothes, and a duffel with a few crumpled candy and granola bar wrappers. The only thing worth salvaging in the whole boat was the battery, which might let us pick up some news on the radio if it still had a charge.

We'd had to stop listening to the rest of the world not long after the blast, when Ed decided he couldn't use any more of the gasoline to run the generator. Before we'd quit listening, the radio talked of martial law declared by the Feds, declarations of secession and war by the surviving state government in Juneau, people fleeing the coasts, burning and looting in what was left of Anchorage. Sometimes we still saw the contrails of the American jets high overhead, but they didn't seem to be fighting anyone, probably because there was nothing visible to fight. The few militia members who survived the attack on Anchorage had either been caught or were holed up somewhere in the bush, like us. Living in the only state left with substantial oil reserves, and none of us could get any gasoline.

"Gas tanks are empty," I said, straightening up.

Ed was looking at the girl. She sure had long legs, faintly covered with light, downy hair. Just at that age of starting to become a woman—hips rounding out below the waist, little conical breasts poking out the front of her sweatshirt.

Neither of us had seen a female since last August, when the cook left with my friends and an assistant guide in one of the boats—which was what had led Ed to locking up the other boats and keeping the .44 Magnum strapped to his waist. I didn't know whether it was losing the boat, the cook, or the only woman for many miles that pissed him off the most.

"Come with us, Steve," they'd argued that night, before sneaking out to load their gear in the boat. Because it had already become clear how Ed was going to run things. But I couldn't, just couldn't make myself go and face what was left down in Anchorage. Nothing left for me, with Sarah in the ashes there.

I could feel the anchor starting to slip on the bottom. I looked at the girl and said, "We don't want to take your stuff or hassle you. We'll just shove off and let you go on. Do you have a paddle or something to steer with?"

"Are you nuts?" Ed said. "We can't let her go like this, by herself."

"She must have some folks or friends downriver." I looked at her. "Don't you?"

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She shook her head, and Ed said, "What's your name, girl?"

"Becky."

"Well, Becky, you'd better stay with us. I got a good, comfortable lodge, and you'll be safe there. Plenty of food, and you could wind up in worse company." He sounded like he was hustling tourists; I almost expected him to tell her how good the fishing would be. Ed could be real charming, grinning that gap-toothed grin—gapped, as he liked to tell it, as a result of a fight with two cops on the San Francisco docks back in his younger days.

She looked around at the river, then directly at us, as if for the first time, and tightened her grip on the machete.

"You can hang onto that brush-whacker, if you want," Ed added.

She kept her pose a moment longer, then relaxed just a bit. "Okay." She shrugged. "Whatever."

He let go of the jetboat with one hand and held it out, and she took it and stepped across the boats, head held high and eyes distant, as if she were boarding her own royal barge on the Nile.

Sarah had been just about this girl's age. They both used the same teen slang, and shrugged with the same absent lift of the shoulders.

"What are you waiting for, dummy?" Ed said to me. "I'm not going to hang onto this thing all day."

"Are we bringing her boat?"

Ed darted his eyes. "We don't need it." Meaning, he didn't have another chain to lock it up with.

"What about him?" I nodded at the stern. "We shouldn't leave him like that, for someone else to find." The girl hadn't even glanced at the stern as she left the jetboat, probably couldn't bear to look at her stepdad like that.

"Bury him in the river, if it bothers you."

Ed didn't lift a finger to help me pry the dead man off the deck. Flies swarmed and crawled out of the man's mouth and nose, which trailed sticky white clots of eggs. Rigor mortis had come so long before that his joints loosened with a steady pull, and I was able to tuck down the outflung arm and roll him up on to the gunnel. His shirt was stained with blood, but the only wound I noticed was a deep slash along the left side of his neck, where a grazing shot might have opened his jugular. I didn't want to look too closely. He splashed into the water and bobbed away in the current. Even with his belly all bloated up from the putrefication gas, he wouldn't float for long, not in that cold water with the silt filling his clothes and body orifices and even the pores of his skin, until it drug him down to the bottom for good.

Ed and the girl waited quietly in the stern of our own skiff as I lifted the battery over the side and stepped across. She seemed not to want anything at all from the boat, but sat there in the middle seat, clenching the machete in her fist.

"Don't you have a sheath for that thing?" I asked.

She licked her lips. "I did, but I lost it."

Ed let go of the jetboat and we went back to the lodge.

Even though it was pretty late, Ed decided to throw a welcoming party. He barbecued a few salmon filets and brought out one of the last bottles of Tennessee whiskey from the locked pantry. It's funny how animated yet awkward men can be who haven't seen a female for a long time, even if she did need to grow up some more. The assistant guide, who'd had his leg stomped by a moose in late winter, tried to stand up straight and not lean

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too heavily on his homemade crutch. Even the three Germans came out of their cabin, and they almost never put in an appearance except when Ed went to roust them to work. After the Feds blew up Anchorage he had declared them political hostages.

When I first saw it, the lodge had been a warm, cozy place, with lots of shaded electric lamps, guests laughing at the bar, the smells of fresh coffee and apple cobbler wafting in from the kitchen. Now the main room was dark, with the generator out and only the evening light coming through the front window. Cobwebs and litter filled the corners and the floor was covered with caked mud and dirt from our boots.

Ed poured the whiskey freely, even offering some to Becky. He and the Germans hit the bottle hard, but I slowed down as soon as I felt it go to my head. Ed sat next to Becky on the couch, touching her a lot on the arm and leg and wearing his most charming gap-toothed smile. She smiled and flirted back, probably thinking it was just a game, trying to play like a woman.

I went outside and down the path to my own cabin. Ed's cabins were built out of two by fours and unfinished plywood, with six bunks each; but there were enough now for each of us to have our own, at least in summer when we didn't have to worry about heat. Only the Germans stayed together all year.

In the bottom of my pack was my most precious possession: a pharmacist's bottle with three oval blue tablets, the last of my Halcion prescription. My doctor had prescribed it for insomnia during the divorce, and I'd brought it along in case I had trouble sleeping in the woods. By now I would take only half a tab after an especially bad time, after several nights in a row lying wide awake, when I grew so desperate I felt like I'd kill for an hour's sleep. Nights when I could hear every mosquito probing and poking through the tiny holes in the window screens, or in winter, the snowflakes crashing through the branches of the trees.

I crushed the last of my tablets into a fine powder and scraped it onto a piece of paper, which I folded and put in my shirt pocket. Back in the lodge Ed was in a loud argument with one of the Germans, who had himself taken offense at Ed's pawing the girl. Which gave me the chance to mix him another drink.

"Shut up, you damn fish-hoarding Kraut!"

"We pay to visit your lodge," the German returned, red-faced. "Our government should be finding us soon." Ed must have always hated the German fishing tourists he nonetheless invited to his lodge year after year, and, ever since he had threatened to shoot anyone who touched one of his boats, they frequently reminded him that their government would someday come looking for them.

"You paid me? Well, I get two hundred dollars per day, per man. You've been here a whole year, tomorrow. That's seventy-three thousand bucks apiece." Despite little education, Ed could do basic math in his head, even drunk, faster than anyone I'd seen. He charged half as much as more upscale remote Alaska lodges, but probably only because no one would come otherwise. "The three of you got my two hundred and nineteen thousand? Then shut the hell up!"

"Here," I told him, "have a drink. The hell with them."

He took the glass, drained a third, and went back to sit on the couch. He leaned over and whispered something in Becky's ear. I pulled a chair over with my own glass, trying to keep the conversation and drinking going. But

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Ed didn't pay any attention to me, only slipped his arm around her waist. The Germans got drunker and started singing. Ed yelled at them to shut up, but they ignored him. For a moment his hand touched his pistol; but then his eyes shifted to the side.

"Let's go someplace quieter," he said to Becky. He drained his glass and worked himself to his feet. "I'll show you your choices of where to stay. You can have your own cabin, if you want, or you can stay in mine. I've got the best place, with its own wood-heated shower and even a flush toilet. In summer anyway."

She still couldn't see what he was up to. I followed them, out the door. I couldn't believe he was still awake and on his feet, after drinking the three tablets down with all that booze. Not even yawning.

"Ed, wait a minute." I caught his arm. "She's a child, for God's sake."

He shook his head, features frozen in the dimmer light under the cottonwood leaves. "Girls her age used to get married and have babies in the old days. Things are like the old days again, in case you haven't noticed. You see any full-grown women around here?"

"Leave her alone."

"So I'll common law marry her. What do you want me to do, go look for a minister out in the woods?" He was drunk, even if not sleepy. I walked past him, toward where she was standing, ahead on the path.

"Becky, there's an empty cabin next to mine."

Next thing I was lying on my side in the dusty path. An image of something I could never have seen—Ed's hamlike fist rushing out of nowhere to hit the back of my head—must have been created by my subconscious to fill in the gap. I couldn't feel anything but I was trying to get up and my arms and legs just wouldn't work. Ed's foot rushed out of the dark and kicked me in the side of the head and then in the ribs.

"You ain't horning in on me, Baston, you bastard!"

"I just came here to go fishing, damn it!" someone said; and it sounded like my own voice, only coming from about six feet off the ground. Then everything was still—I didn't even hear them walk away—except for the hissing murmur of the river and the drone of mosquitoes in my ears.

I managed to roll onto my back but felt too tired to get up. This time of year you could normally read a book outside at midnight; but it was darker there under the trees, though I could see the leaves overhead. I must have dozed off . . . and when I opened my eyes again it was much harder to make out the individual leaves, which meant it was the darkest part of the night, shortly before dawn. The air had grown chill enough for most of the bugs to retire, except for a softly flapping moth that tried to land on my mouth. I blew at it and saw the dim gray plume of my breath. It flew off. I tried to make myself get up and go to my cabin, but must have dropped off once more.

I awoke again to the sound of all the birds. The forest was filled with their songs and I could see them flitting from branch to branch in the gray pre-dawn light. Migrants, I'd read somewhere, from as far as Hawaii and South America, come north to nest, mate, and feed on the abundant summer insects. I was shivering, so I got up to go sit on the porch and wait for the sun to come up across the river. The air was so cold I could see my breath, but I must have dozed off yet again, waking when someone hit me on the forehead. I flinched, covered my head with my hands.

"They're eating you alive," she said.

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She was looking at her hand, bloody from several squashed glutted mosquitoes, which must have come back with the sunrise. She wiped it on her shorts and sat down in the chair next to mine, shoving the machete blade down into a crack between two deck planks.

"Sorry," I said, after a while.

"What for?"

"Because I couldn't help you."

She laughed, and she must have watched a lot of movies or something, because it was a much older laugh than she was. "He didn't do anything my stepdad didn't do."

I was watching her play with the machete, bending it to one side, then letting it spring back and forth. I looked up. "What did you say?"

She gave that shrug that seemed so familiar. "He didn't have much in him before he fell asleep, anyway."

I swallowed. "I should have stopped him."

"Why you?"

"I don't know. Maybe because I had a daughter just about your age. She was the only person I had left, who I loved and loved me."

"Where is she?"

"Gone. She was in Anchorage when . . ." I couldn't finish.

"So how do you know she's dead? We heard in Skwentna that there were a lot of people who didn't get killed. There's supposed to be a refugee camp east of there. That's what we heard, from a guy who came through on a dog team last winter." She looked sideways at me. "That's where we decided to go, after they threw us out of Skwentna."

I thought a moment, shook my head. "She was living with her mother then. Their house wasn't half a mile from the port. There's no chance she could have survived."

Becky was silent, except for slapping the bugs on her arm. "Well, you don't know," she finally said. "Maybe she stayed the night at a friend's."

"What? "

"Didn't she ever stay overnight at her friends' houses? I used to do that all the time. I mean, like, *all* the time." She tossed her head. "My mom used to gripe that I was at my best friend's house more than hers. She's dead now." I didn't know whether she was talking about her mom or her friend, or both.

I realized what she was saying. My ex had only recently bought that house, after we split up. Most of Sarah's friends were in the south end of town, where we used to live. Maybe the whole town hadn't been destroyed; since the tanker had gone off at sea level, the blast radius would have been limited to the downtown and midtown areas, maybe. There had to have been survivors and refugee camps. And there *was* a chance Sarah might have stayed with a friend that night. My ex had been a good mother, wanting to keep a thread of continuity in our only child's life; she and I had each driven Sarah to visit her friends a number of times after the split. It had been summer, and even teenage girls in Skwentna overnighted at their friends'. All the time.

Maybe Sarah had wound up in a refugee camp, after all. Her mother dead, all alone. . . .

I wanted to get mad at this girl Becky. What kind of games was she playing now? It was easier when hope was gone. And now she comes down the river, shows up here. . . .

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False hope. That's all she was offering. Sarah *couldn't* have survived.

The odds were against it, but . . .

"So what do you want to do now?" I asked. "Don't you still want to go downriver?"

"Naw. Ed's sort of an asshole, but there's food here, and he didn't hit me, at least not yet. Maybe I'll stick around for awhile."

"You shouldn't have to live like this." She should be in tears. Didn't I know anything about girls? "You should have a chance to grow up, at least."

She laughed. "You grown-ups kill me. No matter what you do to us, we can figure out how to get by. Some of us, at least." She looked sideways at me again. "So what are you going to do? Ed said he's probably going to kill you."

"I'm leaving." I stood up. "You should come with me."

"Where?" She looked around at the river and the forest.

"I'm going downriver, all the way to Anchorage. Even if there isn't any refugee camp, there must be some authority in charge, maybe the Army or National Guard. There will be someone there to take care of you."

"I don't think so. This is the best place I've seen in a long time. Who knows what it's like down there?" She closed her eyes and smiled. "Ed said he'll take good care of me, that I'm what he's been waiting for all his life. He said he'll make me the queen of the river." She opened her eyes and looked at me. "But I was thinking, you know—you don't have to leave. Why don't you stay here, and do something about him . . . and make me a better offer?"

"You're all mixed up." But I wasn't paying much attention anymore, I was thinking I had to go deal with Ed first. "Where is he?"

"Still asleep."

Ed usually kept his cabin door locked and barred, but she had left the door wide open. His belly bulged out past the edge of the blankets on his double bed, showing white under a curly mat of thick dark hair. The butt of his revolver in the holster stuck out from under his pillow. As soon as I saw it I realized that we really didn't have anything left to talk about. I guess those sleeping pills must have finally taken hold, because I had to prod him with the barrel three times before his eyes fluttered open.

"What . . . the. . . ?"

I showed him the gun. "Give me the keys. And where's some more ammo for this?"

He might have called my bluff, since I didn't know if I could kill him, but he was still groggy, and I guess lying naked in bed must have made him feel pretty helpless. Then again, I suppose people believe others will do whatever they are prepared to do themselves. I collected my things from my own cabin, stuffing the box of cartridges in the bottom of my pack, and went to the main lodge where I unlocked the food pantry and filled my pack the rest of the way.

Becky was still sitting on the porch when I went down to the canoe with my pack and a couple of paddles and life jackets. "Come on, let's go."

She ambled down off the porch with her machete. "In that little thing?"

The Germans would still be here, and I didn't want to take the skiff, which was their only way to get up and down the river. I was only going one way, and after a year of working like a slave for him I figured he owed me that canoe. But I didn't bother to explain it, only told her again to get in the front seat.

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"Sorry. You're a nice guy, but I don't think we should leave. Things could be really bad down there, and I've seen really bad." She looked at the revolver in the holster I had belted to my waist. "I don't get why you don't just kill him and take over this place."

"Because he's a screw-up," Ed said, behind me. "A *dead* screw-up."

I turned slowly, and he was standing twenty feet away, wearing a pair of pants with the belt undone, an unbuttoned shirt, and no shoes. I had thought he must have been too groggy to climb out of bed, but he was holding the rifle pointed steadily at my chest. I'd forgotten all about the rifle.

"Goodbye, Stevie."

Clink.

Ed worked the bolt, squeezed the trigger a second time. Clink. He did it again, more frantically, and the firing pin fell once more on an empty chamber.

And into the silence that followed that last clink, she whispered, so only I could hear, "I took the bullets out of the rifle. I couldn't get to his pistol, though."

I pulled the handgun out of the holster, thumbed back the hammer, and aimed right at the middle of Ed's body where it would be hard to miss. He went pale and dropped the rifle. His mouth opened, but what could he say? He had just tried to kill me, and now he figured he was dead. His hands were raised, eyes darting frantically side to side, but it wasn't his choice now and he wasn't seeing the answer.

"What are you waiting for?" I could hear the eagerness in Becky's voice. "Shoot him, then you can take over here." She tried to smile coyly. "I think we would get along great."

But I didn't have to kill him. If I went downriver, I could float almost a hundred miles of the Yentna and Susitna Rivers. There would be no unnavigable rapids, although Cook Inlet would be treacherous to cross unless I waited for the right combination of wind and tide. The weather looked like it was clouding up, and if it stayed that way or even rained for a few days, the merciless sun would stop melting the glaciers that fed the river and the water levels would come down. Which would make it easier to navigate and find camping sites, but also might let that deep, secret water reveal some of the bodies that had been carried to the bottom. Maybe the bodies sent down from upstream would litter the banks like salmon carcasses. The dried rotten carcasses in Anchorage like the remains of last year's salmon.

"Your daughter," Becky was whispering, "if she is alive, you probably wouldn't know her anymore."

I really could stay here, and not have to deal with finding out. Just squeeze the trigger. Nobody anywhere ever deserved it as much as Ed. I could kill him and nobody would have any problem with it. The Germans would spit on him as they helped roll his body into the river. And Becky . . . she must think she could manage me even better than Ed. She was way too young now, but in a few years . . .

And every night I would see Sarah in her eyes.

I turned, holstered the revolver, and shoved the front of the canoe into the water. Ed regained his nerve, and yelled, "You thieving son of a bitch! I'll come after you!"

"You shouldn't have said that." I walked over to the skiff. The handgun boomed and boomed, two rounds punched through the metal hull, sending up geysers of water. Then I pulled out my knife, cut off the motor's pull

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cord, and threw it in the river. He could fix the damage, but by that time, floating twenty hours a day in good light, I'd be far enough away that he probably wouldn't waste the gas trying to chase me down.

Ed's eyes narrowed, darted, and he was running back up the path, probably to get some ammo for the rifle. I still had plenty of time to get out of range. I looked for Becky to ask her one last time, but she gave me a disgusted look, then walked up the path after Ed. She took a wicked swipe at a willow, the machete cleanly slicing off the top foot of the tree. The same height as a man's neck.

I figured Ed was soon going to have more than coming after me to worry about. Maybe a slashed neck of his own.

This past year, which had been long for us all, had been a lifetime for some. This wasn't a little girl, not like our children had been before. Maybe we couldn't even still call them our children anymore—they had become the children of the people who had blown up that tanker. The oil wars of the last century had done this to the Middle East's children, and now it was happening to our own.

When I got there . . . where would Sarah be, if she was alive? Maybe she'd had to trade her body, learn to use a blade, just to survive. Maybe when I got to Anchorage I'd find nothing but a blackened crater. That might be the easiest to deal with, after all.

I knew I had to go find out. With my ears still ringing from the boom of the handgun, I pushed the canoe off and floated downriver. ❍

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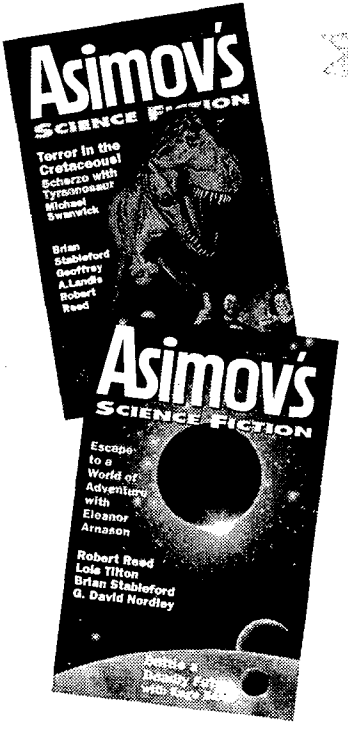

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Esther M. Friesner

Esther M. Friesner is currently putting together the fourth Chicks anthology, *The Chick Is in the Mail,* and she's recently dragged her own daughter, Annie Stutzman, "into the sordid life of a writer." Their first collaborative story, "Repro Man," has just been published in *Merlin* by DAW Books. Ms. Friesner's hilarious new tale for *Asimov's* shows us a young blueblood caught between an ancient dread and a modern horror in . . .

THE SHUNNED TRAILER

Illustration by Jason Eckhardt

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When springtime lays its impertinent hand upon the stony bosom of New England, it is deemed no extraordinary thing for a young man of my years and education to venture forth in search of certain genial entertainments such as may only be procured in sunnier climes than the cobbled streets of Cambridge. Alluring though the houris of sweet Radcliffe may be when snow is drifted deep over Harvard Square, when the Charles River is a ribbon of gray between icy banks, and when a man is willing to date a moose if there is an outside chance that he may get lucky, it is an indisputable law of nature that the local ladies lose their former powers to charm once the thaw sets in. Accordingly I had determined to spend my vernal academic hiatus from the hallowed halls of Harvard in pursuit of the Three B's, namely Brew, the Left One, and the Right One.

I set out upon my pilgrimage of grace with some trepidation. Alas, my finances were not of the most robust, which situation precluded my engaging an aeroplane flight to the enchanted dream-city of unknown Daytona Beach. Like some latter-day goliard, it was my misguided intention to make so long a journey by presuming upon the kindness of strangers and, in an extremity, upon the reliability of shank's mare.

My expedition into alien lands at first seemed blessed by my guardian gods, for I was able to engage the attentions of a carload of young ladies passing through Cambridge on their way south from the red-litten towers of Bennington. It was truly unfortunate that our jolly fellowship came to an abrupt and distasteful end when the maiden who owned our common conveyance discovered me paying my compliments to one of her comelier companions. Being of an excitable nature, she was unwilling to overlook our lack of a chaperone, despite the fact that it is virtually impossible to engage a trustworthy *duenna* at three in the morning when one is more or less completely naked.

Thus it was that I found myself engaging alternate transportation somewhere south of our nation's capital. My luck seemed to have departed with my first ride, for the second car to offer me a lift was full of Vassar girls.

I came back to my senses on an isolated stretch of dirt road well below the Mason-Dixon Line. Apart from a vague sense of having been thoroughly exploited in any number of ingenious ways, and the presence of a gaudy tattoo on my left shoulder which referred to Steven Hawking as (I blush) the "Mac Daddy," I had no recollection of my ordeal. In and of itself this was a mercy, save only for the fact that I likewise had no notion of where, precisely, I was nor of in which direction I must now set out in order to find my way back to a more traveled road.

As I stood thus lost and bewildered under the moon's indifferent cyclopean eye, the heavens grumbled their displeasure and it began to rain like an upperclassman pissing on a flat rock. Now my need was both clear and immediate: I must find shelter from the storm. As I staggered along the dirt road, which was rapidly becoming a muddy slough beneath my Nikes, I thought I spied a light in the distance. Hastening toward it, I soon became half-blinded by the rain, which had intensified in both rapidity and vigor. Ere long I could see nothing before me but that one encouraging blur of light, and when ultimately I reached the door that it illuminated, I took no notice of my surroundings but only pounded upon the portal with my last strength.

The door swung open under my unrelenting blows and I toppled into what I thought was a safe haven. Ah, how little I knew then the nameless

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horrors that awaited me! And yet I must in honesty confess that even had some admonishing angel with a fiery sword appeared to forewarn me of how I then stood in peril, body and soul, I was so grateful to have come in out of the rain that in all likelihood I would have replied to that winged messenger, "Bite me."

No sooner was I under shelter (and ere I was able to take in my surroundings) than the full physical impact of my late hardships manifested itself. My limbs were seized with a mighty trembling, my body was racked by chills and fever, and through my delirium I heard myself declaiming a rather saucy sestina about Voltaire and a well-disposed Merino. I had just arrived at the third iteration of "*Vive les moutons et la France!*" when overtaken by benevolent oblivion.

I awoke to the smell of mildew, stale beer, and deep fat frying. My burning eyes opened to behold a dwarfish, gray-skinned creature which hunched over a miniature gas range, its keg-like bulk swathed in a purple flowered housedress. It clutched a plastic spatula in one paw, and with this it traced arcane symbols in an unknown alphabet within the depths of a black cast iron skillet. Somewhere a recording of Jeff Foxworth routines was playing at top volume. So this was Hell.

As I lay there, amid sheets as damp as the hands of drowned men or importunate Vassar girls, furtively observing the creature at the stove, I was ignorant that other eyes were at the same time observing me. I was made aware of this only when a voice behind me unexpectedly exclaimed, "Look there, Ma! He's woke!"

At this, the spatula-wielding thing turned its head slowly toward me. Ah, pitying heavens! What manner of countenance now met my eyes! It was a face that might be termed human only as a courtesy. The skin thereof was, as I have already remarked, of so drab a cast as must be classified as gray. The few tufts of wiry hair atop the broad, flat head were of no perceptible color at all. The bulging eyes and wide, almost lipless mouth, were batrachian features whose like I had never seen outside of my elementary biology dissection lab. Indeed, as the creature approached me, I imagined that it was preceded by the aroma of formaldehyde, although I quickly realized that this was merely the smell of breakfast.

"So he is," the creature said, and when it spoke I presumed from the timbre of its voice that it was a female. She smiled, a grimace that set my stomach to quaking like a blancmange. In fear for my powers of peristalsis, I sought to revive my intestinal fortitude by diverting my eyes from that uncanny visage and fixing them upon some pleasanter sight.

Fat chance. Above my head a low, curved, poorly lit ceiling stretched off into ill-omened shadows, suggesting a dwelling shaped according to no sane architectural principles but rather based on the Hostess Twinkie(TM). It was narrow to the point of inducing claustrophobia in snails, yet these tight confines had not deterred its inhabitants from packing every available inch of wall, shelf, and countertop with the wretched idols of Kitsch, demon-god of yard sales. To my left I beheld a calendar illustrated with a photo of a pig wearing lingerie. To my right loomed a row of syrupy-eyed children, pastel-colored figurines adorned with idiot simpers and odious observations like: "A Friend Returns Your Car Keys But Holds Your Heart." Nor might I evade the horror by staring directly overhead, for someone had affixed to the ceiling a Mylar imitation of a mirror framed by the words *If You Ain't Smiling Yet, It's Not My Fault.*

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"Dear God!" I exclaimed. "I'm in a trailer!"

"Whoa, can't hide nothin' from you, college boy," Ma said dryly. She brought the sizzling skillet almost under my nose. "Hungry?"

"Ah. . .maybe?" I replied, pulling the sheets up to my chin. I was fully in my senses now, after having had them frightened out of me, and had just become cognizant of the certitude that I had been sleeping *au naturel*. In a moment of painful epiphany, I knew that what I passionately desired more than anything else in this world—even beyond certain private fantasies I had long entertained concerning the Spice Girls and a large tub of chocolate frosting—was to get my pants back on and myself the hell out of there.

My distress must have painted itself plain to see upon my face, for the creature snickered in a dreadfully *knowing* manner, and even went so far as to make a playful feint at the nether hem of my enshrouding bedlinens with her spatula.

"'Sall right, honeybug, they's just dryin' out some. Yer jeans, that is. Won't know about them sheets until later if you get my drift and I think you do, heh, heh, heh, *chuggerumpf!*"

"Aw, now, *Ma*—!" The same voice which earlier had declared my waking state now sounded again in my ear. The thin mattress beside me sagged as a second being, marginally nearer the human form than Ma, plopped himself down beside me on the bed. "Don't you mind her none. She always gets kinda brassy to guests when it's our turn to host the sabbat prayer meet."

"Sabbath prayer meeting?" I echoed, or thought I did. The minor difference in our exchange eluded me, although later on its dreadful significance did not. Of course by *then* it was too late. It always is.

"*Brassy,* am I?" Ma's tone hit somewhere between a first alto and a blender full of cockatiels. She boxed her offspring's ear smartly and snapped, "That how I learned you manners? You keep a civil tongue in your head, boy, or I swear I'll—!"

"Shoot, Ma, where else *would* I keep it?" he replied, and with that an unimaginable stretch of flabby blue-black flesh shot out of his mouth and flew the length of the trailer, returning with terrible alacrity and a copy of *TV Guide* stuck to the tip. "Thee?" he concluded as he wrestled with the tongue-tying periodical.

The sight of this unmanning spectacle at first stunned me, then caused me to break into a nonstop stream of mindless chatter, alternately thanking mother and son for their philanthropy and begging them to give me back my clothing that I might no more abuse their hospitality. The monstrous pair was visibly baffled.

It finally devolved upon the son to address me, when he could get a word in edgewise. "Friend," he said, "I can tell you're a little put off by what I just done, but I can't help it; it's my nature. Not the sort of thing you're used to, what with your big city ways and your canned eggnog and your edible underwear and all of them other high-tone delights of civilization. Well, Ma and me, we're just simple, Elder Godsfearing country folk. Our ways ain't your ways, but we don't mean you no personal harm. Less you'd happen to be a virgin—?" His voice trailed off on a hopeful note, which it was my duty to squelch at once. He was crestfallen, but continued. "Too bad, too bad. Anyhow, I'm assuming that you're mostly upset by our looks. That right?"

"Well, you *do* look a bit—" I groped for a way to speak accurately without insulting the folk who had literally taken me in out of the rain "—batrachian." It was a good word to use, for the odds were excellent that these people

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had never heard it and, rather than taking umbrage, would mistake it for a compliment.

To my shock and chagrin, I was half wrong. The son slapped his meaty thigh and looked extraordinarily pleased. "That's *it!* That's just *it,* brother! You have gone and hit the nail smack dab on the head. What we are, see, is New Liturgy Batrachians, the only spawn of Great Cthulhu who have preserved His teachings and commands and assorted hideous gibberings in the *truly proper and orthodox* manner."

"Not like them sinners up north in Innsmouth and Arkham," Ma put in scornfully. "Hoity-toity little shitepokes, ever' last one of 'em, think they're so all-fired great 'cause they got them Dagon churches with store-bought roofs on 'em and a coupla stuck-up high priests that snuck their sorry froggy butts through Yale Divinity. Hunh! Why, they're no more fit to greet the rise of sunken R'lyeh from the depths than a pig to sing Kenny G's greatest hits."

With those words, the full horror of my situation struck me: Cthulhu! Innsmouth! Arkham! Sunken R'lyeh! Names, alas, whose sinister meanings were not unknown to me. When I was a boy at home and a day student at St. Dimmesdale's Prep there had been one among my schoolmates whose pale complexion, grim mien, and demon-haunted eyes had provoked my curiosity. His name was Randolph Akeley, a boarding student who seldom spoke of his family, nor of much else save the occasional froward Latin declension. Intrigued by his reclusiveness, I resolved to learn more of him. One day I stole into his room, on the pretext of borrowing a condom, and nosed about. He came in and caught me studying a large, expensively framed photograph of a smiling angler displaying a fish almost as large as he was himself.

"Nice catch," I remarked, trying to put a bold face on things.

"That's what my sister said when she married him," Randolph replied in his flat, affectless voice.

"I meant the fish," I said.

"So did I. Was there anything else you wanted?"

I stammered out my contrived excuse for calling upon him and he detained me only a moment while he located the item I had requested. I was deeply startled to discover that a person of Akeley's unsociable temperament had such a thing to hand, yet there it was. It was of an unfamiliar make with nothing upon the wrapper save the image of a black goat in one of those red-circle-and-sideways-slash symbols. Later on, when again my inquisitive nature got the better of me and I opened it, to my horror I perceived it to be *a condom of alien and unknown geometry!*

That was enough to put paid to any further fascination young Randolph Akeley might have held for me. We never exchanged another civil word, although shortly thereafter I received in the post a crudely printed pamphlet entitled *Cthulhu Awareness for the Non-Inbred Seeker.* In this manner did I learn of the Elder Gods, of Nyarlathotep, of Azathoth, of Yog-Sothoth and Shub-Niggurath and a dozen others whose names alone seemed to be the product of a demented mind with a bad lisp. Within the pages of that hellish tract did I read of how they had been banished for a time from the sight of man, likewise of the arcane and unspeakable worship still done to these deities from beyond the stars, worship by depraved, half-mad cultists whose ultimate goals were to bring about the Elder Gods' return from well-merited exile and to reestablish their vile reign over all the earth!

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I returned the pamphlet to Akeley privately, in politic silence, although I did feel constrained to give him a dollar when he thrust his *Save the Shoggoths* collection can under my nose. At the time it seemed a cheap price to pay for my escape.

What price would such flight be now?

My hosts, mother and son, were somewhat troubled by the silence whither my apprehensive recollections had deposited me. Ma shook her head and sadly said, "Y'know, if'n I had a nickel for every time I heard people like you go on all smarmy-like about how looks don't *really* matter and it's what a body's like on the *inside* what counts, I'd be able to buy me a decent Sunday-go-to-orgy dress and then some. But talk's cheap, even for a bigot like you."

"I am *not* a bigot! I'm a Harvard man!"

"*Ha!* If you was any more fulla shit, your eyes'd be brown. You ready to swear you're not carrying 'bout half a hunnerd prejudicial thoughts 'gin Butchie and me just because we happen to look like frogs and worship the Elder Gods and—?"

"Bu—Bu—Butchie?" I repeated idiotically. It did not sound like a name proper to a potential purveyor of human sacrifice.

It was the first time I had ever seen someone with gray skin blush. "'S not my real name," he said sullenly.

"Which is—?"

Butchie swallowed hard: "Kermit." The corners of his mouth turned down, which placed them somewhere in the vicinity of his knees.

In the ensuing awkward silence, Ma left the trailer briefly, returning with my clothes. They smelled of sunshine, fresh air, and Tide. (Though, for all I knew, it was a malign and fantastic Tide that once had swirled about the spires of Great Cthulhu's blasphemous abode in sunken R'lyeh and—Oh, the hell with it, it was plain Tide laundry detergent, probably bought on sale at Wal-Mart.)

"They're startin' to arrive," Ma said as she tossed my apparel onto the bed. "Cousin Ephraim's just now pullin' in with that old family rattletrap of his, and the car don't look too good either. Now, city-boy, I don't mind you talkin' down to me under my own roof, but I'm tellin' you right now I won't have you doin' the same to my blood kin, nor my friends and neighbors, so if you can't get down off your high night-gaunt and act mannerly, you can just hit the road right now. Otherwise you're more'n welcome to stay, and maybe we can scare you up a ride to the bus depot after. Like Butchie says, we're hostin' the sabbat here today and I wouldn't mind an extra pair of hands to help me get the food on the table."

"I'd be more than happy to oblige," I said. "It's the least I can do to thank you for taking me in last night." What evil angel possessed me to give such a reply, so glibly? It must have sprung from some lingering ghost of shame for my indefensible bias against Ma and Butchie, a prejudice based solely on their looks, their creed, their economic and social standing, and their abuse of the Budweiser logo as an interior decorating motif. No sooner were the words out of my mouth than I repented them, but there could be no going back. No stronger bond exists upon this earth than the word of a Harvard man, I don't care *what* that self-styled Camilla-Mistress-of-Pain-person over on Brattle Street claims.

Ma was more than pleased. "Well, that's *mighty* pink of you, city-boy, *mighty* pink. Me and Butchie'll give you some privacy so's you can get de-

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cent, and then you just come on out and join the fun." With that they left the trailer.

I dressed with alacrity. I was not in any hurry to become a part of the "fun," as Ma termed it, but reasoned that the sooner I discharged my obligations, the sooner I might be on my way with a clear conscience. Fully clothed at last, I flung wide the trailer door and stepped into nightmare.

I also stepped into something else. I regret to say that this accident caused me to curse loudly enough to draw Ma's attention.

"Gods *damn* it, Billy-Joe Tindalos, you pick *up* after them hounds o' yours!" she bellowed, shying an empty bottle at the head of a snot-nosed abomination from beyond the stars or under the porch or somewhere.

As I scraped the muck from my shoes, I looked around. The space before the trailer teemed with all manner of weird beings, some of the same amphibian appearance as Ma and Butchie, others whose hair had a disquieting tendency to hiss, and still others whose skin bore the leprous cast of a fish's belly. To these, one and all, Ma extended the hand of kinship and greeted them with a cheerful, "Iä, Iä, y'all! Grab a cold one and kick back, we'll start the nameless rites and obscene gibberin' soon's the band tunes up some."

Something tapped me moistly on the shoulder. I turned to face a pair of Ma's guests, beings of such abhorrent and alarming appearance as to make even Jerry Springer think twice before booking them. The male was clad in a grease-stained sweatshirt, the sleeves cut off, the front limned with faded runes proclaiming it stolen from the Miskatonic Co-Ed Naked Chug-a-Lug Team. His mate sported a similar garment, its message to the world simply *I'm With Eldritch.*

"Yo, city-boy," the male said, his breath a musky compendium of all things foul and loathsome, with just a hint of Cheez Doodles. "You seen our kid?"

"I'm sorry, I'm a stranger here," I replied. "I wouldn't know the little fellow if I tripped over him."

The female snickered. "Oh, if you done that you'd *know* him all right! Right before he sucked your brains out through your eye-holes."

"*I heard that,* Selma Jean!" Ma's words boomed out as her formidable presence manifested among us. "What d'you think yer doin', tryin' to run off this nice young man when he's said he'll help me set out the noon meal? Maybe you don't *want* to eat my prize-winning barbecue after sabbat?"

"*Your* barbecue?" The male licked his lips, a gesture that likewise wetted down all of his face and part of his lady's. (Fortunately this was a sight for which Butchie's earlier display of lingual excess had prepared me.) "Man, your barbecue kicks *cloaca.* Let's get this show on the road, 'cause once we hit that last 'Cthulhu f'thagn,' I'm beatin' feet for the table." He grabbed Selma Jean and dragged her away.

"Services be startin' real soon now," Ma informed me. "I got to go, but meanwhile why don't you see to the spread? All the stuff what's s'posed to go out on the tables's in them coolers under the tree."

There was only one tree she could mean, a titanic, gnarled, lichen-shrouded botanical anathema that only a deeply kinky druid could love. The trailer that had been my haven the previous night was—as I now saw—but one of many that nestled, like scabrous mushrooms, among its far-flung roots. In its distant shade reposed a number of picnic tables, a pyramid of beer kegs, and the prophesied coolers.

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As I approached the tree it was my misfortunate necessity to pass between several of the other trailers, a gauntlet of visceral terror. Innumerable lawn flamingos, their plastic beaks twisted into leers of unholy malice, followed my progress with glittering, evil eyes. The incessant creak-creak-creak of spinning pinwheel sunflowers thrust their droning paean to iniquity through my throbbing skull. The one ray of hope that fleetingly lightened my way—the sight of a welcomely prosaic statuette of the kind commonly referred to as Our Lady of the Upended Bathtub—was instantly extinguished when I noticed that the supposed Madonna had more tentacles than conventional iconography generally allows.

I was in a cold sweat and breathing heavily by the time I reached the coolers, but I soon stiffened my backbone and set to work. As I relieved the coolers of their contents, I was only half aware of the muted sounds of Ma's kinfolk raising their voices in worship. The glubberings and whinings, the shrieks and ululations, the bad guitar riffs and worse banjo solos, all united in one quasi-musical discord that would probably go platinum in a heartbeat if anyone from ASCAP showed up in these parts with a tape recorder.

"Purty sound, ain't it, city-boy?"

I looked up from my labors and saw yet another of Ma's relations perched atop the table beside me. She was a young female of certain healthy thoracic dimensions that permitted me to overlook the fact that she had a mouth that even Mick Jagger would have to kiss in installments. The thin fabric of her top (one that announced "My Parents Howled on the Frozen Plateau of Leng and All I Got Was This Lousy T-shirt") was stretched to the point where merely watching her breathe was a religious experience.

"H—how do you do?" I rasped.

"Jus' fine, less'n Daddy catches me," she replied with a grin that covered two zip codes. "Name's Beulah May Waite. Uglier'n a shaved dog's ass, ain't it? I like my nickname better."

"Which is—?" I asked, leaving a cooler still half-full of gelatin salads to look after itself.

"Can't Hardly." My comprehension registered as a beautiful scarlet flush, which only encouraged her to straighten her shoulders in a way designed to bring down empires. "Tsk-tsk, city-boy. Maybe you better reel in that tongue o' yours before someone mistakes you for one o' the family and hauls your butt back to services. They's compulsory, y'know."

"In that case, why aren't *you* over there?" I countered, scrambling to recover some minuscule portion of my self-possession.

"'Cause Daddy thinks I'm doin' homework." She waved a familiar black-and-yellow booklet at me. I never knew that Cliff's Notes published a study guide to *The Necronomicon*. I was about to ask my bosomy batrachian babe where she'd purchased such an item, as a clever prelude to less academic discourse, but it was not to be. My suave moves perished unmade, my cleverly seductive chit-chat never left my lips. A dire air of cryptic menace fell over the trailer park, an atmosphere redolent with such ominous significance that I found myself immobilized like one who has stumbled upon the site of ancient and unhallowed sacrifice, or has studied for the wrong subject during finals week.

"Yog have mercy!" Beulah May cried, wringing her hands.

"What is it?" I was at her side, ready to defend her fair person against any peril. "What's wrong?"

"There! Look there!" She pointed to the north and moaned with fear.

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Well might she moan! For now I too saw, against a morning sky gone suddenly dark, the unmistakable funnel shape of an onrushing twister in search of its natural prey, the trailer park.

The gravity of our situation had a peculiar effect on me. Rather than run away screaming in mindless panic, I felt instead washed by a great calm. Solemnly I said, "Ms. Waite, we must warn the others."

"Oh, it's no good, not a lick of good at all!" she keened, clutching her hair. "They's all deep into the rites by now; they won't quit in mid-*Iä* for no one or nothin'!"

"That remains to be seen," I replied and, taking her firmly by the hand, we sought out the place where Ma and the rest were calling upon the Elder Gods.

They were conducting their services in an open space behind my hosts' trailer. The same innate curiosity that in former days had made me snoop in Randolph Akeley's room now manifested itself as an unhealthy desire to view the infernal shrine to which they paid their cacophonous homage. After all, I reasoned, with the twister fast bearing down upon us, this stygian fane might soon be literally gone with the wind. Fast in the toils of my own overweening nosiness, I winkled my way into the crush, Beulah May in tow, for a better look.

I winkled my way out again doubletime and stared at my companion. "That's a wading pool in there," I stated.

"Uh-huh," she said.

"Your extended family is standing there, three deep, chanting barbaric hymns to a child's wading pool."

"Sometimes they do an uptempo number, too," she offered.

"They are standing around a child's wading pool—a child's *Power Rangers* wading pool, might I add—with a folding lawn chair set up in the middle of it."

"Well, they can't just plunk the idol of Great Cthulhu straight in the *water*. That wouldn't be respectful. If you already got a shrine and an idol and a *salaried* preacherman like we do, you gotta have an altar, too. *Anyone* knows that." She spoke disdainfully, like every religious Insider who has ever relished telling an Outsider that he is ignorant, ineffectual, and inferior, a smug state of mind that allowed her to forget our imminent danger.

I did not care to be condescended to by the likes of Beulah May Waite. "Your *shrine* is a Power Rangers wading pool, your *altar* is a folding lawn chair, your *idol* is a stack of Mrs. Paul's frozen fish sticks boxes, and your *preacherman*—salaried or not—has just placed a paper party hat on top of the whole soggy mess."

"I should hope so; it's Great Cthulhu's *birthday*. But I guess you didn't know that *either,* huh, city-boy?" Ms. Waite had fallen out of temper with my reportage of the obvious, and apparently impatience brought out a viciously mean streak in the girl for she then sneered: "I guess they just never taught you anything about that up at *Yale*."

"*Yale?!*"

That did it. That was the straw up with which my proud Harvard-educated camel's back would not put. Her effrontery had no excuse: I was wearing a crimson and white shirt proud with the name of fair Harvard. She could not hope but know; the insult was deliberate, and one that I would not brook even from a woman of twice Ms. Waite's endowments.

Anger kindled in my belly. Deep within my entrails I felt the old powers churn. My eyes burned with the rage of a thousand demons. Minor light-

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nings crackled from my fingertips and potent words of austere and fearsome condemnation roared from my mouth. The worshippers around the wading pool broke off their mesmeric chant, although the banjo player wouldn't take the hint. I blasted him to strings, splinters, and moist froggy smithereens with a minor side-spell and inwardly thanked God that I had opted to major in something more practical than English.

The amphibian congregation scattered before me in terror, hopping into their waiting vehicles and speeding off at a furious rate. Beulah May vaulted onto the back of a Harley, straddling the bitch seat behind a jacket-wearing member of the Yuggoth's Angels. I laughed triumphantly to watch her flee my just and awesome wrath.

Silly me: I'd forgotten all about the tornado.

It had not forgotten about me, though. I heard its approaching roar and felt the first lashings of its captive winds at my back. I fell to my knees then and there and raised my voice in prayer. "O Lord," I began, my eyes tightly closed against earthly distractions. "Lord, I implore Thee, save me. And if that's not possible, then at least don't let me have to watch a cow go flying past before I die. If I've got to go, let me do it without suffering the indignity of any stupid movie clichés first, please. Amen."

Hey, I liked *that scene with the flying cow!*

My eyes shot open. "Who's there?" I demanded, though I had to shout my challenge down the throat of the screaming wind.

Me, said the wading pool. And with no more prologue than that, the tentacled countenance, leathern wings, and squamous bulk of Great Cthulhu erupted from the waters. He was wearing the paper party hat and looked like a squid on a toot.

Thus is it written in ancient tomes of forbidden lore: *Verily the Elder Gods do not fart around.* (This sounds better in Latin.) With a single stroke of his gargantuan paw, Great Cthulhu swept the tornado from the sky. A grateful hush fell upon the heavens and the earth. I tried to stammer my thanks as well, but the strain of the moment would not let me do other than raise my voice in a reedy rendition of "Happy Birthday to You."

The Elder God stopped me before I got to the end of the "How old are you now?" verse. Perhaps he was sensitive about such matters. *Look, don't mention it, all right?* he said. *I was summoned anyway, I might as well answer a prayer or two as long as I'm in the neighborhood.*

"But I wasn't praying to *you,*" I felt bound to point out.

Hey, Coke or Pepsi, Mickey D's or Burger King, paper or plastic, who gives a shoggoth's ass? His bat-like wings rose and fell in an affable shrug. *Besides, if you weren't praying to me now, you will be some day.*

"I. . .don't really think that I'm going to—"

Sure you will! My demurral did not seem to affect his good humor at all. *Because it's guaranteed; you won't have a choice. Baby, it's comeback time!*

"This comeback, it's not going to be *too* soon, is it?" The thought of my dear Mummy's reaction if I didn't get married in the Episcopal church scared me worse than Great Cthulhu ever could.

Sooner than you think, college boy. I haven't been wasting all *my time dreaming the aeons away in sunken R'lyeh. Damn sharks keep swimming up my nose every few centuries, for one thing. I figure that since I can't get any decent REM sleep anyhow, I might as well get off my thumb, bring about the return of the Elder Gods, overrun the globe, reward our followers, destroy our enemies, and yada, yada, yada.*

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"Is that why they were invoking you here?" I asked, unable to repress a shiver. "To begin the conquest of earth?"

The fearsome being gave me a disbelieving look. *On my* birthday?!

In a more amicable tone he confided, *Listen, college boy, these are nice folks out here, so nice that I don't have the heart to tell 'em how all their rites and sabbats and pep rallies and frozen ichor socials won't do dick to bring back the good times. Oh, that sort of thing was all right once, but it'll take more than faith to float sunken R'lyeh. If you really want to* accomplish *something these days, you've gotta have the chops, the tech, the brains. And to get that, it's not* what *you know, it's* who *you know: Network, network, network!* He slapped one paw into the palm of the other to emphasize his words. *Which is exactly what I've been doing. No more seeking out the debauched mongrel races of the world, no more scattering my spawn like there's no tomorrow, no more breeding with cannibal South Sea islanders and barbarian savages in the cold wastes and people from Massachusetts, nuh-uh. Besides, who knows where they've been? No sir, nowadays I've got some* really *scary guys on my side, and I didn't even have to say "Of course I'll respect you in the morning" to get them!*

"Who are they?" I demanded. "What manner of men would be so degenerate, so corrupt, so possessed of an unfeeling lust for pure, ultimate, uncontested power and worldly dominion that they would betray their fellow human beings and serve *you?*"

The horrendous creature from between the nighted gulfs of space winked at me and flicked his party hat to a more rakish angle with the tip of one bloodstained claw. *Tell you what, sport, I'm gonna leave you a clue.*

Something dropped from his paw. It splashed into the water at his feet, creating a plume of fetid smoke and a violent burbling on impact. Ere the last seething hiss died away, he was gone.

I stood for a time recovering my composure. Then, with rapidly beating heart I steeled myself to face the smoldering token which the awful Elder God had left in his wake. By inches I sidled closer to the edge of the deceptively peaceful wading pool and with a manful effort gazed down at what reposed beneath the softly lapping waters.

Ah, the accursed thing! Even now, even here, safe once more within fair Harvard's ivy-swathed incubation pouch, the memory thereof fills me with a griping nausea and a terror whose claws are set into the uttermost depths of my soul. That thing, that damned "clue" that the departing Elder God had left me was no ordinary object, but a warning to all mankind, an omen that wordlessly spoke of our predestined doom, a harbinger of the inevitable extinguishment of all things kind and warm and good and human in the earth, in our lives, and in our very hearts. For you see, it was—it was—

It was the class ring of a graduate of M.I.T.! ○

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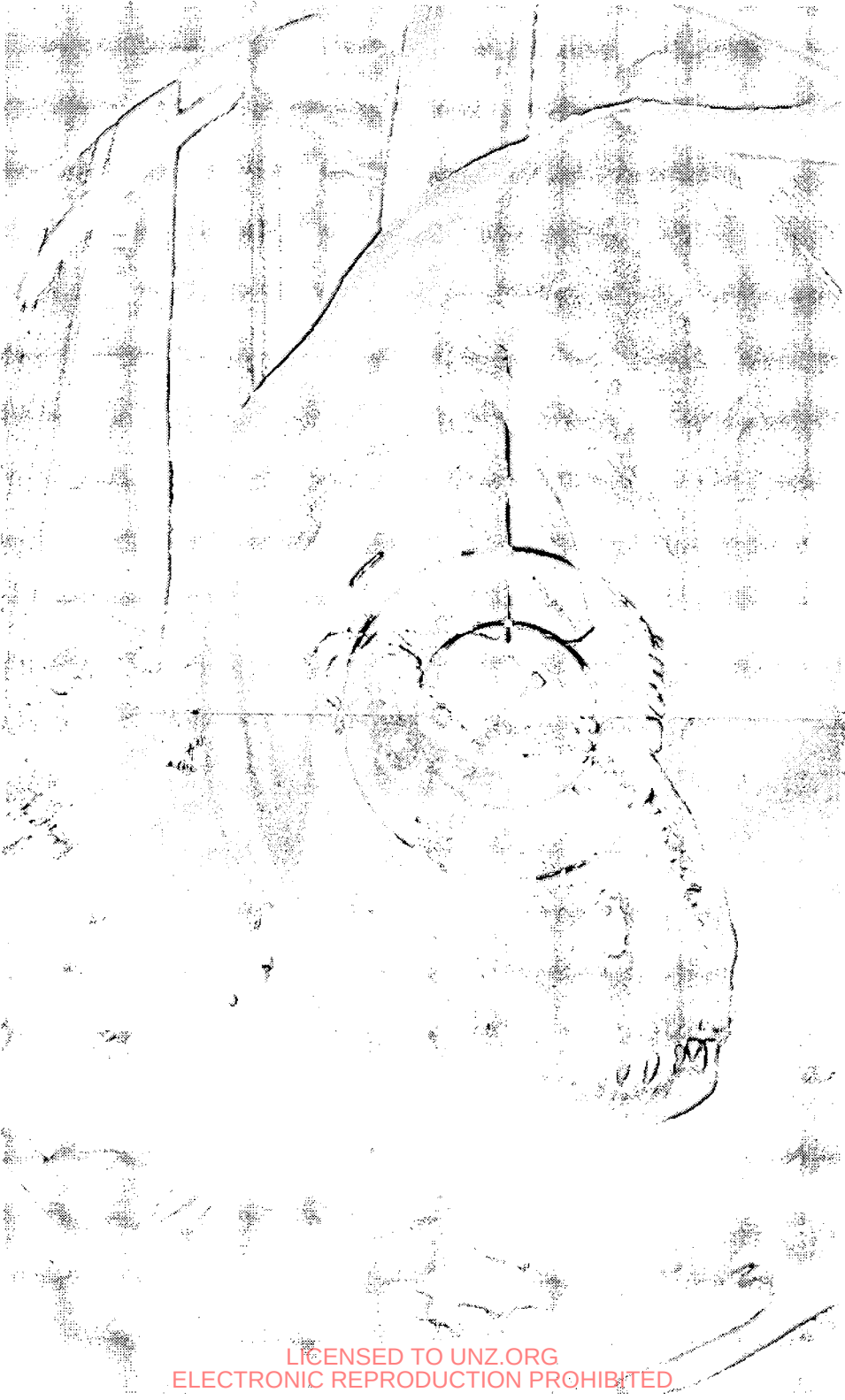

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O'Neil De Noux

O'Neil De Noux is a former homicide detective who is best known for his Dino La Stanza murder-mystery series. His last book, *The Big Show,* was published by Pontalba in March 1998 and his next one, *La Stanza: New Orleans Police Stories,* will be out later this year. Mr. De Noux teaches writing at the University of New Orleans. His short fiction has appeared in such places as *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Tomorrow, Pulphouse,* and *South from Midnight.* The author's first tale for *Asimov's* takes a brutal look at what it means to be . . .

TYRANNOUS AND STRONG

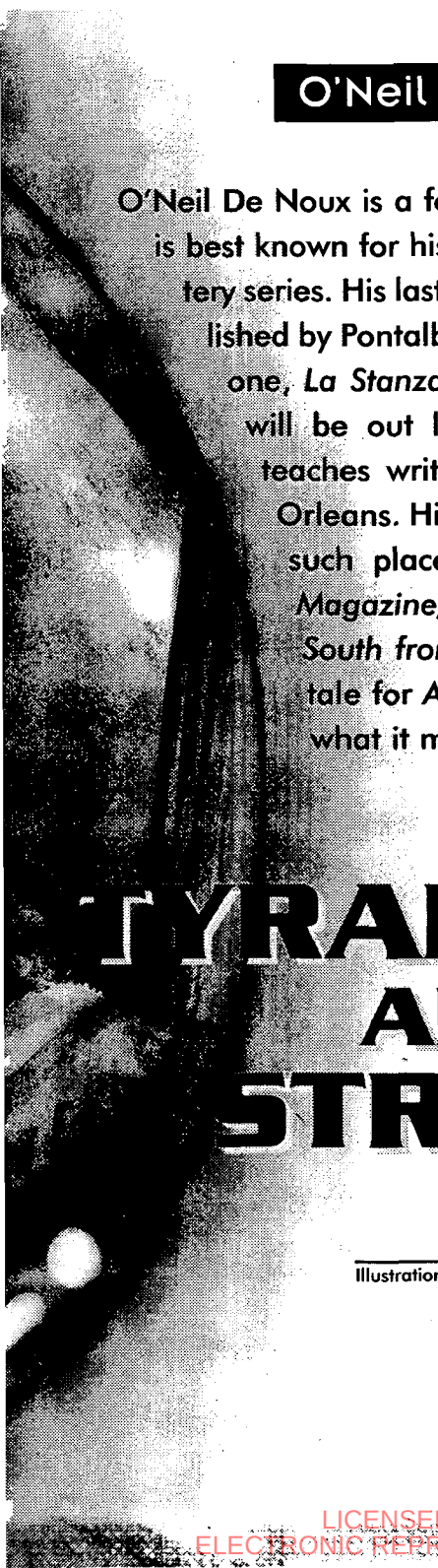

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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And now the STORM-BLAST came, and
he
Was tyrannous and strong:
He struck with his o'ertaking wings,
And chased us south along.
"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"
—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Standing on the high cliff overlooking the narrows that separates our island from the mainland, I see an animal that is not supposed to exist in the northern hemisphere of Octavion. I feel my breath slip away as a full-grown tyrannosaur moves out of the Magenta Forest. Its huge head swings from side to side as it steps out on the beach across the narrows. It stops and sniffs the air.

Although I'm wearing sunglasses, I still have to shield my eyes with both hands from the strong Octavion sun shimmering off the white, brilliant sand where the tyrannosaur stands. I've never seen one this close before. It has to be fifty feet long and at least twenty feet high.

Green primarily, it's covered with long reddish-brown stripes that remind me of an Earth tiger. The color of its stripes match perfectly the red-brown tree trunks of the Magenta Forest. Its head twists like a bird's head, a huge bird of prey, in jerky movements, as it sniffs the air. It looks up in my direction, and I bend down to hide behind the mangroves that cover the sheer face of this four-hundred-foot cliff. I'm downwind, but it keeps sniffing the air. It takes a long look at our island, twists its head again, and scratches the beach with its foot.

It takes three quick steps toward the narrows, pauses, then rushes into the water. It is a dark green-brown stain in the clear turquoise water. Its eyes and nostrils protrude from the water as its long tail propels it, like a crocodile, straight for our island. As it closes in on the small beach below, I peer over the side of the cliff.

It hesitates before coming out of the water, and, for a moment, I hope it'll turn back. But it rises on the rocky beach below like a dragon of death and heads toward the woods to the left of the cliff. It moves stealthily into the extension of the Magenta Forest that covers part of our island.

Doing my best not to panic, I hurry back to my land rover, crank up the engine, and drive back to our stone cabin a good five miles away. My cattle pay the rover no mind as I drive by their pasture. The hogs wallow in their mud pit, oblivious to me as I park the rover between them and the cabin. I look around for a moment, at the peaceful scene, because it'll never be peaceful again. Not with such a beast on the island.

I walk around to the front of the cabin and pause momentarily to look out at the Cerulean Sea to calm myself. Perched atop a low rise, our small cabin overlooks the bright blue sea. The water glistens in the sunlight and looks peaceful. A breeze flows in, as if on cue, and the air smells of salt water.

I pull off my sunglasses and tuck them in my shirt pocket as I step into the cabin.

"Stella," I call out as I move to the gun cabinet.

My computer answers, "Yes, Mac. I see you're back already."

"MacIntyre," I correct her automatically and she ignores my correction, automatically. I reach into the gun cabinet and pull down a Marlin 30-30

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and check the lever action. I point it out the front window and dry fire it. The hammer falls smoothly forward with a nice click.

"Stella. Take a priority message."

"Yes, MacIntyre," she answers, a hint of sarcasm in her deep, feminine voice.

I run my hand across the Marlin's black walnut stock and over the blue-steel finish. It feels cool to my touch.

"Yes, MacIntyre. I'm ready." The sarcasm is still there, but she's curious. I like that in a computer.

"A tyrannosaur crossed the narrows this morning and is on the island."

"Unlikely," Stella says. "There are no tyrannosaurs in the northern hemisphere."

"There's at least *one*." I aim the Marlin out the window again, carefully focusing my aim, leveling the hooded brass bead up front between the buck horn rear sight.

"Did you see it yourself?"

"Yes. And I'm going to kill it."

I put the Marlin on the table below the gun cabinet and reach up for the Browning Big Game rifle.

"MacIntyre," Stella's voice is strained. "You cannot kill a tyrannosaur. I suggest we contact the Coast Guard."

At a solid seven pounds, six ounces, the Browning is a beauty, stainless steel with a black oak stock. I pull the lens caps off the Zeiss Supreme scope.

"I'll contact the Coast Guard immediately."

"No," I say. "I repeat, this is a priority message." I let it sink in a second, although I know it only takes milliseconds for Stella to understand. She can be sarcastic, but when I say "priority," she has to obey. Period.

"All right," she says, icily. "I won't take the time to remind you it is an indigenous creature, therefore you cannot harm it. It has the right of way."

I step over to the open front door and aim the Browning at the lavender tree at the edge of the rise, where the ground falls away to the wide beach below. I'd sighted the new scope only a month ago, calibrating it carefully. I hold it up to my right eye and focus on the tree.

"Please acknowledge," Stella says.

"I have to kill it. I have no choice." I dry fire the Browning.

"The Coast Guard will tranquilize and relocate it."

"The Coast Guard is three hundred miles away."

I put the Browning next to the Marlin and reach into the cabinet for the boxes of bullets, 30-30s for the Marlin, 30-06s for the Browning, all full metal jacket rounds.

"Why don't you just stay in the cabin? Maybe it'll go away."

I open the first box and tell Stella, "Tyrannosaurs don't just go away. There's enough food on this island to feed a herd of tyrannosaurs. Cattle, hogs, iguanodons on the east side of the island and those small ankylosaurs—"

"Nodosaurs," Stella corrects me.

"And one human," I say as I start loading the Browning. "Check your memory. The first settlers. The Sepia Forest. My great-uncle was killed by an Octavion tyrannosaur."

"Okay, I'll humor you. How do you propose to kill it?"

"I'm loading my Browning and I'll take the Marlin as back-up."

"Rifles?" Stella's voice rises. "You can't kill a tyrannosaur with a rifle!"

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"Who says?"

"I'll check my data bank." It takes her two seconds. "There's no record of anyone killing a tyrannosaur with a rifle." She waits for a response.

I finish loading the Browning and start loading the Marlin.

"Maybe you can scare it away."

"Yeah," I answer. "Right."

"It was just a passing thought." She clears her throat. I love it when she does that, since she doesn't *have* a throat. Then she adds, "Nothing scares a tyrannosaur except a larger tyrannosaur."

"Exactly."

I slip the sixth round in the Marlin, and wish I'd bought one that held more rounds. I pull down my hunting vest and start stuffing bullets in its four pockets, Marlin rounds on the left side, Browning rounds on the right.

"You will not be able to kill it," Stella says matter-of-factly. "It is the largest land predator in the known universe."

"So?"

"You're not listening!"

"I'm listening. I'm just not paying attention." I finish stuffing the vest and start stacking the remaining boxes of bullets in an ammo can.

"I tried calculating the odds," Stella tells me. "But there are no odds. You cannot kill a tyrannosaur by yourself."

I look at the face of her blue screen. "Stella, there isn't *anything* a human can't kill."

She sighs.

I push my point, "If there's one thing history has taught us, it's that a human can kill *anything*."

"You are trying my patience," she says.

I snap the lid shut on the ammo can and tell her, as patiently as I can, "Look, it's come to eat. It's come to stay. It's a *tyrannosaur*. It's come to rule this island. *My* island. Understand?"

"But you'll get in trouble, even if you do manage to kill it."

"Who's to know?" I walk into the kitchen and start filling plastic water bottles.

It takes her a moment. Her voice is even lower than normal. "Then why did you tell me?"

"So you can tell my sister what happened to me if I don't come back."

She huffs at me and I have to smile.

"Those weapons are antiques."

She's trying. I don't respond. She knows they are new, even the bullets are less than six months old.

"How long do you calculate it will take you to kill it?"

I pull down my backpack and start shoving jerked beef and vitamins and whatever food is handy inside. Three minutes later, I'm packed and ready. I stack everything in the living room and head for the bathroom.

"How long before I should contact anyone, if you don't return?"

"Don't contact anyone," I tell Stella. "If anyone contacts you after one month, you can tell them. Not before." I go into the bathroom and close the door.

She says something, but I can't hear her in the only room shut off to her.

When I step out, she says, "Please don't do this."

I stop at her monitor and tap it gently with my right hand. "It'll be all right."

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"You're patronizing me."

"I know." I turn back to the gun cabinet and pull down my flare gun. Then I stuff it and as many flares as I can into the backpack.

"As soon as you leave, I'm calling the Coast Guard."

"No you're not. This is a priority message. You *can't*. You're incapable." I look around in case I've forgotten anything.

"I'll find a way. If there's one thing history has taught us, it's that a computer can out-maneuver a human. Given the time."

"Take your best shot, darling." I scoop up the Browning and the backpack and walk out. It takes me three trips to move everything into the rover.

Stella has the last word on my final trip out. She says, "I'm working feverishly to override your command. I predict success imminently."

"I love you too," I tell her as I leave.

Before driving off, I walk to the other side of the cabin and brush the leaves off my wife's tombstone. I kneel next to it and pick a leaf off my daughter's smaller tombstone.

"Well, sweetheart," I tell my wife. "I might be seeing you two very soon. A tyrannosaur just crossed the narrows."

I close my eyes and see her face again, her lapis-blue eyes, her warm smile, her long red hair flowing in a breeze from the Cerulean Sea. It's hard envisioning my daughter's infant face, except that it is tiny and round and as beautiful as an angel.

I can almost hear my wife's voice answer me.

"A tyrannosaur? On *our* island?"

How she loved this place. Wouldn't leave it, not even for childbirth, not even when the fever struck three months later and she and our daughter faded. She knew I'd called the Coast Guard, for all the good it did. By the time they arrived, she and our baby were gone.

I look back at the cabin we built, then up at the cobalt blue Octavion sky.

This beautiful, unforgiving world, this mystery of the galaxy, drew our grandparents, like thousands of other earthlings. Just as this island drew my wife and me.

While scientists like my father racked their brains, trying to discover why Octavion's dinosaurs are so similar to Earth's prehistoric beasts, we built a life. The scientists are no closer to solving this great riddle of the galaxy.

I know better than to ponder these things. *Why* isn't important to me. *Why* a tyrannosaur exists on the northern hemisphere isn't important. It's *here*. And I have to do something about it.

My knees crack when I stand up. "Forty and I'm falling apart," I tell my wife. I see her face again. In my mind, she's eternally young at thirty. Dead five years now, it seems longer. I stretch, then tell her, "Either I'll kill it or it'll kill me."

A breeze blows across me and I smell the sea again. I pull my sunglasses out of my pocket and put them on as I walk back to the rover. I hesitate, then go back into the cabin, pulling off my sunglasses as I sit in the lounge chair and ask Stella, "Please give me all the information you have on tyrannosaurs."

"I'm glad you came back. You must reconsider your decision. I've calculated the odds and—"

"Stella. Give me whatever information you have on tyrannosaurs."

She sighs and then says, "My information is limited. I'll access the central library in Scarlet City."

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"No," my voice raises. "Nice try."

I have to ask again before she spouts out, "The tyrannosaur of the planet Octavion is fifty feet long, twenty feet high, and weighs four tons. Its head is five feet in length. Its teeth are up to seven inches long and serrated, like a butcher's heavy chopping knife. It is warm blooded and tenacious in its pursuit of prey. It can run as fast as forty miles per hour. It is a most adept hunter and also a scavenger, robbing lesser predators of their prey.

"That's all I have in my data bank. May I please access the central library—"

"No," I cut her off, rise, and put my sunglasses back on. "See ya'," I say as I leave.

"The odds are against you. Approximately one thousand, one hundred and fifty to one."

I walk out on the porch. Behind me she says, "I'm still attempting to override your command, Mac. I predict success."

I walk back in, reach down and unplug the telephone line.

"Override this," I tell her.

"What did you do?"

"Ciao, darling," I tell her on my way out again.

"Mac! MacIntyre! What did you *do?*"

On my way back to the rover again, something Stella said gives me an idea. She called it a scavenger. I go into my shed and scoop up a canvas tarpaulin, open the back of the rover and lay the tarp inside, leaving the rear door open. I back the rover up to my smoke house. I grab a pair of gloves, a meat hook, and the stainless steel cart, and wheel out a side of beef to lay on the tarp in the back of the rover.

The smoky scent of cooked beef fills the rover as I crank up the engine. My empty stomach rumbles. One of my cows looks up at me as I leave her and the others in their ignorant bliss and drive back toward the cliff.

I keep a sharp look out as I drive to a wide meadow, which is the only way up from the cliff, through the forest. The meadow is about a mile across, with woods on three sides, woods that fall away to cliffs. The woods to my right and in front are the extension of the Magenta Forest, thick tree trunks and green foliage. The woods to my left are mostly mangroves and puzzle trees, too thick for a tyrannosaur to navigate.

I pull the rover off the dirt road and drive to the center of the meadow to a small rise. The ride is bumpy and I have to slow down. The dark green grass looks nearly black in places. I stop the rover and climb out. The grass is up to my knees. I pull out the side of beef and drag it up on the rise where the grass is shorter. I pull out my Bowie knife and slice off two thick strips of beef, which I bring back to the rover.

I drive back to the road and set up a good firing position. The forest to my right is too close, less than a hundred yards away, so I point the rover back the way I came, the forest on my left now. I move over into the passenger seat, the Browning pointing out the open window.

I scope out the rise and can see the side of beef clearly in my sights. Sitting back, I grab my binoculars in one hand and use the Bowie knife to cut off slices of beef with the other. The meat is juicy and delicious and surprisingly tender. I make a note to cut down the smoke house time in the future. If I have a future.

I wash down the beef with cool water and empty an entire water bottle finishing off the tasty beef. I keep scanning the meadow and the forest

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around me as I wait, as the sun creeps high in the sky. At least a Cerulean breeze continues flowing over our island, cooling me in the mid-day heat. I take off my vest and drape it over the back of the seat. My sweat-covered khaki shirt, pressed against me, cools me with each breath of sea breeze.

Slowly, I scan the forest around the meadow and even watch the mangrove woods for the beast. I wish I'd brought coffee. An hour slips by, then another. And I wonder if the damn thing has already moved past me and is now feasting on raw beef back at my cabin.

I readjust myself in the seat and keep scanning the forest. My eyes are getting tired, but I keep looking as another hour passes. Then, I see it. The beast steps out of the forest at the far edge of the meadow. I blink, rub the sweat from my eyes and look back through the binoculars. I was looking right there and hadn't seen it, its camouflage is so perfect in the woods.

Raising its head, the tyrannosaur sniffs the air, and looks around. It takes a hesitant step forward, lowers its head, and rushes for the side of beef. I grab the Browning and push my right eye against the sight. The tyrannosaur is so fast, it's at the beef before I can get into a comfortable firing position.

It hits the beef at full speed, raising it high, snapping its head to slice the side of beef in half. The tarp flies into the air. The tyrannosaur throws its head back and swallows the beef. I aim carefully and start squeezing the trigger.

The tyrannosaur lowers its head and I set my aim square on its forehead. I squeeze slowly, keeping the cross-hairs in place until the Browning kicks against my shoulder and I see it strike the great beast in the forehead. The loud report echoes across the meadow.

The tyrannosaur flinches, then lowers its head again and steps back to gobble up the rest of the beef. I aim again, this time just below its left eye, and fire. Its head snaps back slightly.

I smell my sweat along with the acidic smell of cordite from the bullets. I aim again. The tyrannosaur's mouth opens, and it bends its head back and roars. I aim at its throat and shoot again. I see it hit the neck and see the tyrannosaur react, snapping at the air now. I aim again and it bolts, racing back for the forest. I squeeze off a fourth shot but miss.

It's too fast. I fire a fifth shot, but it isn't even close. Two heartbeats later, the tyrannosaur disappears into the forest not far from where it had come out.

Damn! Damn! Now I have a *wounded* predator on my hands.

Maybe my shots will take it down eventually. *Yeah. Right!*

I pull the Browning back in and grab the Marlin as I slip over into the driver's seat. I raise the binoculars but cannot spot the beast. I keep looking for any movement in the forest. I wait. Then, I pull the binoculars down as I feel a shudder. Is it the ground? Or am I shaking so hard? Or is it my thundering heart?

I feel pin-pricks along my neck.

I look at the forest closest to me. Nothing.

I wait.

Then I put the binoculars down and wipe my eyes. What the hell am I waiting for? A voice in my mind that says, "Get out. Get out now!"

I start the engine and look around, and it comes out of the forest not a hundred yards away, rushing right for me. The ground shudders. The rover kicks over and I slam it into drive and hit the gas.

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The rover flies down the dirt road, kicking dust up behind me, and I see the tyrannosaur angling to cut me off. It's so big and so fast! I push the accelerator and quickly realize it has the angle on me.

What the hell was I thinking? I was going to kill *that* with a rifle?

The bastard is smart enough to cut me off, angling for the road ahead of me. I have to go cross-country. I slam the brakes and skid to a grinding stop, shift into four-wheel drive and punch the accelerator, taking a hard right turn into the meadow.

The rover bounces and I have to slow down. I'm doing less than forty now, and it's gaining on me, so I accelerate and bound up and down across the meadow. The Browning flies out the passenger window, the Marlin smacks me on the arm and falls to the floorboard. Water bottles boomerang around the cab. My vest rises then falls as I bounce off the seat and hit my head on the roof.

The beast roars and I feel my stomach jump. It's closer now, running hard, right for me. I shove down the accelerator and the rover lurches and gains ground. I see woods in front of me and race for it—mangroves and thick-branched puzzle trees. Maybe the ground is smoother near the woods. Maybe I can skirt the woods and get back to my cabin and hide and call the Coast Guard and pray.

Then, in a heart-sinking moment, I'm airborne, springing high and coming down hard. The rover bounces twice, bottoms out, hits something, and I'm airborne again, twisting in mid-air.

The rover slams sideways to the ground and flips over and over. I hold on to the steering wheel as I hit the roof and then the seat, then the roof again. Until, with a hissing and groaning, the rover slides to a stop. I'm upside down, the roof partially crushed. The engine whines, then coughs and dies. Smoke and dust choke me and I pray it's not on fire.

I reach to unbuckle my seatbelt, but it's jammed. As I wiggle, my left knee stings in pain. I look down and it's twisted in an awkward position. I catch my breath, pull out my Bowie knife, and cut away the seat belt. I slide to my right and pain shoots up my knee as I straighten my leg.

My elbows are scraped and bloody and I wipe my face with my hands, glad to see it's sweat and not blood. My left leg throbs as I look around. And the ground shudders. I watch the tyrannosaur arrive. It slows, but doesn't stop completely, circling the rover. Then a deafening roar reverberates though the rover, causing my teeth to chatter.

It raises a foot and kicks the rover, shoving it a good ten feet. Grass clumps up on my right. The huge, three-toed foot raises again and kicks the rover, spinning it completely around. A sharp explosion above is followed by a hiss.

It bites a tire. Then it bites another.

I keep still as I hear it sniffing above and then around the sides of the rover. I sees its snout now, probing, bumping against the side of the rover. I smell blood and see a trace of red on its snout. It growls and sniffs again.

The head rises and I watch its feet. It circles the rover again. Then, it backs away and waits. A loud roar makes me jump and I close my eyes. It roars again, higher-pitched, and then moves a little farther away.

I watch it move away slowly, sniffing the ground as it goes. It turns back three times, but keeps moving away until it reaches the forest. Turning once again, it looks at the rover and roars, then slips between the red-brown trees and green foliage and disappears.

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I look out at the mangroves not fifty yards from where I lie. Carefully, I pull myself forward and manage to squeeze to the open passenger-side window. I grab the backpack, but it's stuck. My knee aches as I yank on the pack, and it rips as it comes out. I hold on to the bottom and try to find the Marlin.

I keep watching the Magenta Forest, in case the beast comes out again.

Sweat fills my eyes and I wipe them again.

Sliding out of the rover to the black-green grass, I look again for the Marlin, but can't find the damn thing. The pin pricks are back along my neck and I turn to the mangroves and crawl away as fast as I can, my knee throbbing with each movement. At least I can move it, even bend it, so it's not broken.

Wrenched, I tell myself as I get close to the mangroves. It's dark in there, and I rise and limp into the safety of the darkness. As I reach the first puzzle tree, I lean against it. Surprisingly, I can put some weight on my knee.

I hear a noise, a distant roar. No, it's more like a scream.

I move into the mangroves, climbing over twisted branches, squeezing between the large tree trunks. I keep looking back at the bright meadow. I find a nice branch to sit on to rest a moment. Then I see the tyrannosaur, standing across the meadow at the edge of the Magenta Forest. I see a movement to its right. It's a nodosaur.

I realize I still have the binoculars around my neck, so I lift them and look.

The nodosaur is only twenty, maybe thirty feet from the tyrannosaur. It's looking at the huge beast and backing away slowly.

The tyrannosaur looks around and then lowers its head, snaps, and rushes the nodosaur. Although the nodosaur is nearly twenty feet long, with oval-shaped plates and spines on his back and sides, it's got no real defense against the tyrannosaur. The big beast rams the nodosaur with its head, and the nodosaur rolls. The tyrannosaur is so quick! It pins the nodosaur down with one foot and bites a huge chunk from its throat. I see blood gush and pull the binoculars away.

Then, as if I'm hypnotized, I put the binoculars back up to my eyes and watch the great predator feast. Its blood-slick snout rises from the nodosaur. Its jaws open and bite down, head twisting as it yanks away another large chunk of meat. Then I see something unexpected. The huge jaws seem to expand, to open sideways so it can swallow more easily.

Lord!

I get up and move through the mangroves and puzzle trees, trying to work my way through them toward my cabin. I don't get twenty yards before I have to stop. The branches are too tangled, I can't squeeze through. So I work my way back, put the backpack on the same branch I sat on earlier and pull out a water bottle.

No longer cool, the water still tastes sweet. I drink too much and have to force myself to stop. I search the backpack, and see that the flare gun is still there, but only two flares are left inside. I pull out a piece of beef jerky, but put it back.

Lifting the binoculars, I see the tyrannosaur is no longer across the meadow. Whatever's left of the nodosaur is hard to distinguish at this distance. Okay, I tell myself, what do I do now? Should I try to slink home after dark? What if the tyrannosaur is a better hunter at night? What the hell do I do now?

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I wipe sweat from my eyes again and see my wife's face for a moment. So I close my eyes and snap-shots appear in my mind, pictures of us discovering our island, of our first nights in the tent we'd brought, of the long seasons building our cabin and our ranch, of the years spent toiling beneath the relentless Octavion sun, making something of our island.

Opening my eyes, I gaze at the meadow, and, as if in a heat-driven daze, I see the empty years I've spent alone, keeping what was left of our home together, going through the motions, toiling to keep it. And now, maybe, I'm near the end.

As if to answer me, the tyrannosaur comes racing out of the Magenta Forest again and runs headlong across the meadow, straight for my rover. Barely slowing, it rams the rover and sends it sailing. As soon as the rover hits the ground, the tyrannosaur is on it again, biting off part of the roof and a door, flinging the pieces aside.

Then it stops, backs away, and takes a careful look at the rover. Craning its head down, it sniffs it and starts moving around the rover, sniffing the ground. It moves back to where the rover rested before its last attack and nuzzles its snout to the ground. And, slowly, it moves toward me.

Like a bloodhound, it homes in on me, heads straight for me, and stops just outside the tangle of mangroves. I sink down behind the puzzle branch and peek out at the beast. I hear its sharp, snorting breaths. Its deep-set orange eyes peer right at me, and blink. This close, I see that its eyes face forward, like a human's, like a predator's.

It growls a low, deep growl, opens its jaws slowly, and roars at me. I fall back from the impact. It is a terrifying sound, a rumbling deep from within the great beast that makes me shiver. Shaking, I rise and stare back at the cold eyes. It moves forward and bites at the mangroves, ripping the trees, tearing away the twisted branches. Tossing them aside with a jerk of its huge head, its jaws snap down on more trees as it works it way toward me.

Go eat something else, you moron! Something bigger. There's cattle on the other side of the island!

I back away through the mangroves, climbing over gnarled branches. My knee aches in response. The beast keeps coming, its dagger teeth slashing the foliage, snapping the trees. I worm my way around a large tree as the tyrannosaur rips up two mangroves at once, then spits them out.

It's no moron. It has to kill me. I *hurt* it.

Looking around, I see two huge puzzle trees close together, mangroves wrapped around them, and I crawl between them. A minute later I can go no farther. I look down, but cannot even reach the ground.

It's right behind me now, bending its head forward, sniffing me out.

It sees me and presses its snout between the huge tree trunks. It can't reach me. It backs up a step, snarls, then presses its snout between the trees again. Its jaws open, and the smell of dead flesh washes over me. I see bloody meat caught between its dagger teeth.

Then, like a tremendous snake, the tyrannosaur's black tongue slithers out and reaches for me. It's forked and moves around slowly from left to right, probing between the mangrove branches for me.

Pushing as far back as I can, I pull out my Bowie knife and hold it high. The tongue flicks my way and I slash it, drawing a red slice of blood. The beast pulls back and roars in defiance. It looks at me, switching eyes as it peeks in.

Throwing back its head, it roars louder than ever, then begins tearing at

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the puzzle trees with its feet, kicking and slashing with the three large talons on each foot. Splinters fall against me and I press back away from it.

The tree on my left begins to lean away as the tyrannosaur bites at it like a mad dog, growling as it bites. It's so large and so close now, I smell its musty flesh and feel myself gagging. I hold the Bowie knife high. Three more bites and the puzzle tree is splintered.

The tyrannosaur opens its jaws and shoves its ugly mouth at me. I'm shaking so hard, I have to hold the knife with both hands and slash at the mouth, slicing its lower lip. The tyrannosaur bellows and pulls back.

Then it slams its face into the opening it made between the trees and bites at me. I pull back and it still can't get me. It keeps trying, teeth snapping, and I feel a sudden sting on my right arm.

I hear myself scream as I plunge the Bowie knife into the beast's lower lip. It jerks back and the knife falls out of my hand. The tyrannosaur takes a step back and snaps its jaws at me. I look down and see the knife sticking up in the ground next to my left leg. I reach for it, but can't get to it.

The tyrannosaur lunges forward, its jaws snapping inches from my head. I reach down as far as I can until my fingers touch the knife's handle. I can't get a grip, but I can push the knife against my leg, then lift my leg slowly until I grab the Bowie, the deadly jaws snapping inches from my face. I slash out again at the beast's mouth. It backs away again.

Frantically, I wipe the sweat from my eyes and see that my right arm is bleeding and realize one of the seven-inch dagger teeth has nicked me. The tyrannosaur continues backing away, still watching me. I wait one heartbeat, then another, then another. Holding my knife high, I reach into the backpack and find the flare gun.

The tyrannosaur cranes its head to the side as it watches me.

I fumble with the flare gun, crack it open, and shove a flare inside. I barely have time to close it, as the tyrannosaur comes for me again, jaws open.

I point the gun into the beast's mouth, but wait until it's only a few feet away before firing. The flare disappears inside the mouth. The monster hesitates. I smell sulfur and the tyrannosaur jerks its head back, then jumps away from me, throws its head back, and roars a high-pitched roar. It jumps back again and leans its head forward and coughs, and the flare bounces out.

Simmering, the flare ignites with the fresh air and the tyrannosaur jumps back away from it.

Move! I have to move.

I push my way out and stumble, as fast as I can through the mangroves to my left. I plunge headlong, fighting my way through the branches. I know it's behind me. I know it won't stop. I go down on all fours to squeeze under some branches, and look back.

The tyrannosaur is kicking at the flare now. Dirt flies as it kicks. The bastard's putting out the flare!

I find I can move between the mangroves if I keep moving to my left, paralleling the meadow. Knowing the flare won't occupy it long, I move as fast as I can. Tripping, I fall behind a puzzle tree and stop to catch my breath.

I use the Bowie knife to slice off a piece of my shirt to wrap around the cut on my right arm. It isn't as bad as I thought, more of a scrape than a cut, but I know the scent of blood will only help the tyrannosaur. I hurry forward and see the meadow more clearly now. Using every ounce of strength, I press forward, bolting and lunging, jumping and crawling.

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I know it's back there. I know it'll come for me. It'll never stop.

Then I hit an open area as the mangroves fall away and the puzzle trees are replaced with the towering red-brown trees of the Magenta Forest. I stop and look at the meadow. I'm only fifty yards from it now, and know that a low cliff lies to my left and that the cliff where I first saw the tyrannosaur is about two hundred yards across the edge of the meadow.

If I stay here, it'll have no problem hunting me down in the forest.

If I can make it to the high cliff, I might be able to work my way down into the mangroves and hide along the sheer face of the cliff. I see myself clinging to the mangroves, like a monkey, while it can't reach me from above or below.

Then I hear it behind me, snorting and sniffing.

I go down on my haunches, my knee on fire, and see it as it moves along the meadow, tracking me. I go back into the mangroves and fight my way to the low cliff that falls away gently to the savanna along the east end of my island.

The tyrannosaur moves into the Magenta Forest and follows me.

I can move through the mangroves quicker. But I'm so tired now, I ache everywhere.

Moving around a scruff pile of dead mangroves, I slip and fall, and feel wetness. It's water. I'm sitting in a cool stream that I didn't know existed. I lean forward and shove my face into the bubbling water, and it's so good that it sends a shiver through me. I drink and drink and only lift my head to catch a breath before drinking more.

Pulling my head out, I listen for the beast, but hear nothing.

I dare to peer around the scruff pile and there it is, moving slowly into the mangroves from the forest. I reach into the backpack, pull out the flare gun, load it, and fire the last flare into the scruff pile. Then I back away, as, with a sudden popping, the dead wood ignites in a wall of flames between me and the tyrannosaur.

If it gets through *that,* it can eat me. I give up.

I watch the flames rise as I lean back against a low mangrove branch. The tyrannosaur bellows, but the fire roars back and rises high into the trees and pushes out on both sides now. The wind guides the fire toward me and the low cliff.

If I push hard, I might be able to skirt it and slip back into the Magenta Forest behind the beast. I look back, and my God, the beast is trying to get through the fire, snarling at it, kicking at the burning mangroves! I keep going and lose the tyrannosaur in the smoke.

Reaching the edge of the forest, I look around, but can't see it. If it's lurking in the woods, I'm dead. If it moved out into the meadow to get at me that way, I have a chance. Catching my breath, I take a careful look around.

Then I bolt, hobbled by my limp, and race headlong through the forest. I make good time, my heart stammering, my body aching with each step. Then I hear it and stop. Leaning against a tree, I hear its roar again.

And thank God! It's on the other side of the fire, in the mangroves, searching for me.

I keep going, keep running, keep moving on and on, and the roar of the fire dies away behind me. When I finally reach the edge of the forest, I stop to catch my breath. The sheer cliff where I first saw the beast is only twenty yards in front of me, the meadow to my right now.

Slower now, I cross over to the mangroves at the top of the cliff and look

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down at the turquoise water. Shielding my eyes with my hands, I see a dark object moving in the narrows. It comes up and a spout of water rises as an ichthyosaur belches out air.

"Where the hell were *you* when the bastard swam over?"

I take in a deep breath and check myself. My arm has stopped bleeding. I remember dropping the backpack earlier, but my binoculars are also gone, and my jaw hurts.

A cool, sea breeze wafts up at me and I feel a sudden chill. Goosebumps dot my arms. I turn slowly and it's there, not a hundred yards away, standing in the meadow, looking at me. It twists its head to the side, bird-like, lowers its huge head, and rushes for me.

I scurry into the mangroves and start climbing down the cliff. The green mangrove vines are not as thick nor as strong as the wooded mangroves above. I sway as I descend and bump back into the cliff just as the tyrannosaur arrives above, sending a cloud of dirt down on me. It roars at me.

I duck, then climb further down, the vines not as sturdy here. I hold on and look up. The tyrannosaur leans down and snaps its jaws at me. More dirt tumbles down. I close my eyes. When I open them, I'm startled to see the great beast is leaning farther down. Its right foot is anchored in the mangrove trees at the cliff's top, its small hands gripping the mangroves along the cliff's face as it leans down to get at me.

The mangroves shudder, then shake, and I fall a few feet, but the vines hold.

It roars at me and belches its acidic, dead-meat breath at me. It snarls and snaps and grinds its teeth, its orange eyes glistening at me. I try to move to my side, but the mangrove vines are thinner there.

Then the vines shake again and I skid down several feet, my arms scraping against the side of the cliff. Dirt and rocks rain down on me and I shut my eyes again. When the turbulence stops, I look up, and the great beast is silent.

It looks funny, and I realize that it's leaning back against the cliff top, using its great weight to keep from pulling down the vines. It growls at me, its eyes watching me. I hear another noise, a strange, yawning sound. It is the sound a tree makes when its trunk is slowly breaking.

The mangroves!

They're giving way.

I look up and see some of the roots coming out above me and next to the tyrannosaur. I hold on. It is then that I realize the beast is holding on too. Its only movement is the rise of its chest with each deep breath and the movement of its deadly eyes as it watches me.

Slowly, cautiously, I pull myself up just out of the great beast's reach. It growls at me. I keep going. Although I'm exhausted, I find the strength to pull myself up. I have to stop after each movement. But I manage to move up even with the beast along the cliff, and it snarls and snaps its jaws at me.

Wrapping vines around both legs, I pull out my Bowie knife and start cutting away the mangroves. Every few seconds, I look at the orange eyes and they leer back at me, mean with hate. And slowly, inexorably, the vines snap and the tyrannosaur begins to dangle.

It squirms once and pulls more vines free and stops, its front claws digging into the side of the cliff to keep from falling.

As soon as the mangroves quit moving, I untangle my legs and scramble

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up to the top of the cliff. I race around the tyrannosaur and start hacking away at the mangroves where its right foot is anchored.

It roars back in defiance and whips its huge tail at me. I duck under it and lie down on my stomach.

Using both hands, I chop at the branches, cutting through one, then another. Suddenly, with a loud snap and a sudden rush, the mangroves give way and the tyrannosaur falls free four hundred feet down to the rocky beach below.

It bounces and falls heavily into the shallow water along the beach, and does not move.

"Ha!" I hear myself yell down to the beast. "It's called gravity, asshole!"

And I start laughing as I lie there, my arms so weak I can barely move them, my knee numb with pain, my body so battered that I ache over every inch. And I keep laughing, until I feel lightheaded.

I close my eyes and wait for whatever strength is left in me to return. Later, I sit up, on the cliff's edge, and look down at the tyrannosaur.

Its neck is twisted, its body contorted in a pretzel position. And a bright red stain surrounds the great beast.

Shielding my eyes with my hands, I watch the stain grow. Some time later, I spot the first ichthyosaur cruising past. It turns and cruises by again.

A few minutes later, the first ickys strike the tyrannosaur. I watch as they dart in, tear off a piece of the great beast, and swim away at great speed. And ever so slowly, the ickys drag the body from the shallows, devouring it in pieces, reddening the bright turquoise water.

I watch until the early evening rain comes, like clockwork, and washes across our isle from the Cerulean Sea. I smell the smoke behind me as the long rain puts out the fire I started. Opening my mouth, I lean back and drink the rain, and it's so good.

It takes a while, but I manage to stand up. I slip the Bowie knife back in its sheath, turn my back to the narrows, and limp away through the meadow. Finally, I reach the dirt road where I'd positioned the land rover to take pot shots at the tyrannosaur that morning, a lifetime ago. I move down the road slowly, thankful for each painful step.

The rain eventually stops, as suddenly as it started, and the sky is streaked in purple and blue and orange.

It's almost dark by the time I reach home. The Octavion sun is blood-red as it falls beyond the far horizon, like a red disk sinking into the Cerulean Sea. I stand outside our cabin for a moment and watch the sunset. Rust-red light cloaks the land.

The red light follows me into the cabin, giving the front room a crimson glow, casting my shadow like a black ghost across the furniture.

"Mac?" Stella calls out. "Mac, is that you?"

I realize I'm grunting as I walk. As I pass, I tell Stella, "MacIntyre."

"Oh, MacIntyre! Are you all right?"

"I'll tell you in a minute."

I move into the hall.

"What?"

"I have to go to the bathroom."

"Oh."

I draw a sink full of water, shove my face into it, then wipe away the grime with a towel. Looking up in the mirror, I see a pair of bloodshot green eyes looking back. My face is nicked with cuts and my jaw is bruised. My

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hair, more gray than brown now, looks as if I just stepped in from a windstorm. I almost laugh at the comical face in the mirror.

I go back out into the kitchen and grab a chilled water bottle from the refrigerator before plopping down on my sofa. I take a long, cold drink of water, my throat tightening with the sudden coolness.

"Well," Stella says. "What happened?"

"I need a new land rover."

Four seconds later, Stella's voice drops an octave, "MacIntyre! What happened?"

"I'm all right. A little banged up, but I'm okay."

"What about the tyrannosaur?"

"It's dead." I take another drink.

Stella pauses, probably for effect, before she says, "Well, you were right. There isn't anything a human can't kill."

Suddenly, I feel nauseous. Sitting up, I put the water bottle on the end table, close my eyes and rub them. I see stars momentarily, then see the great beast lying in the shallows, the red stain expanding around it, and I feel sad, very sad, as if I'd done something terribly wrong.

"I had no choice." I say it aloud before realizing it.

"Of course you didn't," Stella agrees. Then she clears her throat and says, "That wasn't funny. Disconnecting the phone line."

I almost smile. "Actually, it *was* funny."

Pulling my legs up on the sofa, every muscle aching, I lie back and close my eyes.

"If you reconnect the phone line, I can summon medical help." Stella won't give up.

"Stella. This is a priority message. Erase all reference to this tyrannosaur from your memory."

"Of course. But when you've rested, you have to tell me everything." She pauses, then adds, "You really killed it. I'm so proud of you."

I want to tell her that I didn't kill it. Gravity did. But what's the use. The last thing I am is *proud*.

I smell the sea again as a breeze floats in through the open front door. I'm not getting up to close it. My steady breathing soon causes me to drift and I feel sleep coming on.

Again, I say it aloud before realizing. "I had no choice."

"Of course," Stella agrees. "It was either you or it. You had no choice."

"Don't patronize me."

"I'm not. You had no choice."

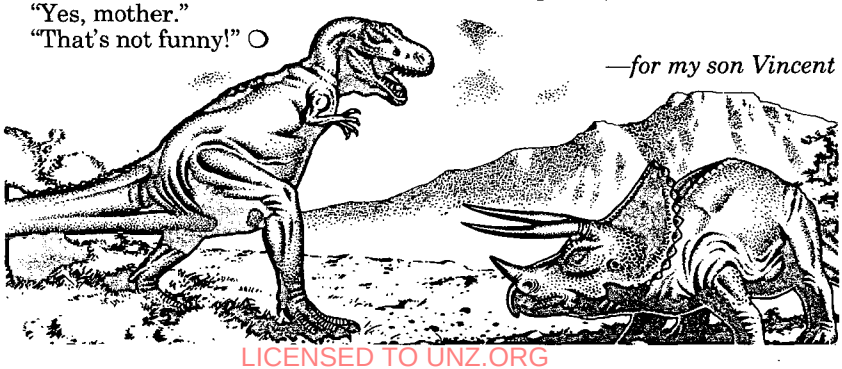
If I keep telling myself that, maybe I'll believe it one day.

A moment later Stella tells me, "You'd better get some rest."

"Yes, mother."

"That's not funny!" ○

—for my son Vincent



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G. David Nordley

THE FOREST BETWEEN THE WORLDS

In such stories as "Comet Gypsies" (March 1995), "Dawn Venus" (August 1995), and "Alice's Asteroid" (October 1995), the author has explored a number of the bodies that make up our solar system. Now he takes us to his own remarkable planets, Haze and Shadow, for an extraordinary journey of discovery. Mr. Nordley would like to thank fellow author, Geoffrey A. Landis, for the pumping mechanism that helps the forest keep these planets from crashing into each other.

Illustration by Wolf A. Read

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A persistent buzz against his wrist drew Akil Mateo into reality from deep sleep. "Kita?" he mumbled, and reached beside him. Empty air. Where was she? Where was he?

As sleep faded, he found himself in a hammock of fine netting beside a hut in a clearing in a forest. Where? Memories flooded back into consciousness. He was fifty-one light years and change from Earth on the planet Haze and Kita was long gone.

He felt another buzz on his wrist and hit the wait-a-minute bump on his com patch; so much for sleep. He wanted to think it was a bad dream, but seven weeks ago, as he had experienced time, he'd come home to find her things gone and a message telling him that their sixty-three-year marriage was over. He'd jumped at a chance to head out here and put all the reminders far, far behind him. But his dreams and the emptiness beside him were the greatest reminders of all and they followed him everywhere.

His com patch buzzed again. He shook his head, yawned and stretched. After almost forty hours in the field, his body felt like lead in spite of the one-tenth gravity. It had better be important.

At least this was a cool day, not much over 30 Celsius, he imagined, and with just a faint but very welcome breeze. The vast cloudy globe of Shadow, overhead, was already a waning crescent and the upper reaches of the interforest were already lost in darkness; in less than an hour, their sun, Oshatsh, would vanish behind it for twenty minutes. Three hours later, true night would fall. Here, between the twin worlds, the exhausting pace of six-hour days nearly doubled.

Buzz. "Hello?"

He looked at the image on the tiny screen stuck to his wrist. The shaved head of a woman stuck out of the tall, gently undulating low-gravity waves in the nearby lake they used as a swimming hole. The subtext told him the call was from Marianne Jones, a biological researcher he'd met a couple of standard days ago when he'd come down to the base.

"Akil Mateo?" she asked.

In her Australian accent, the last syllable of his name came out "kill" instead of "keel." He sighed.

"Ah-keel here," he said, exaggerating the pronunciation slightly. "Just woke up. What is it?"

"Sorry, but you're the only one around. Could you check Sharada Fina's hut and see if she's there?" Her voice sounded worried. "I've been getting no answer from her com patch for the last hour."

"Sharada Fina? The anthropologist? Rumored to be going native?"

Jones frowned. "She may be up in the forest. If so, she's overdue."

Akil blinked. "May be? Didn't she check out?"

"Maybe through her system, but it's got a privacy block. Base ops says her com patch is still in her dome with vital sign monitoring off. That's okay if she's in her dome, but I'll bet she left it there."

He automatically ran the fingers of his left hand over his com patch, feeling the discrete bumps of its few manual controls. A com patch was generally deemed too unobtrusive for the Forest People to understand as technology, as long as you didn't let them touch it or use it in their presence. His matched his skin color so well that he could barely discern its circular outline. "Leaving the com patch behind is going a bit far, isn't it?"

"Tell me about it! Sharada talked Uma Weiss into keeping technology out of the forest. Uma made an exception for com patches, but Sharada doesn't

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like even that. Look, com patches record everything, so I think tech transfer is a smoke screen—she just hates people looking over her shoulder up there."

"How does she record her data?"

"She dictates it when she gets back to a stand-alone system, then puts out an edited report."

He looked at the darkening band of green between the worlds. While the interforest wasn't particularly dense, there was a lot of it and, he recalled, some vines were actually conductive. "Maybe she's shielded by the vines."

Jones shook her head. "I've never had any problem. I think she just wants to have her ducks in order without back-seat drivers while she fights the battle over how intelligent they are."

Akil sighed. "I see. I'll check it out." It made sense. In addition to technological hygiene, leaving the patch behind would help preserve Fina's data monopoly.

He got up, stretched, and swung his legs off the hammock. The curly "grass" smelled vaguely like ginger as it squished beneath his bare toes. He glanced at his shorts hanging on the hammock support and shrugged. The heat led the ground staff to be very casual around the complex, for comfort. Well, he'd held out for two standard days to the likely, though politely unstated, amusement of everyone here. To hell with it. He smiled at himself; talk about going native.

He dug his toes into the turf and pushed off, remembering to lean well forward to minimize his air resistance and maximize his traction. People told him it got to be automatic in a few standard days, but it was still very artificial for him, fresh from the one gravity of the star base. It felt okay as long as he concentrated and didn't have to react.

Two modest gliding strides took him across the compound's central area to Dr. Fina's dome. Like all the others, it looked like one of the three-meter ramshackle nests of sticks constructed by the pseudosimians. But there was a modern door set back in the shadow of the semicircular opening, and the huts came equipped with all modern conveniences. Not too surprisingly, the door didn't open as he approached.

"Open," he said anyway. It didn't.

Akil shrugged. She could, of course, be sleeping. Akil pursed his lips and ran a hand through his curly, jet-black hair. One didn't violate a colleague's privacy lightly.

"Jones? Are you copying this?"

"Yeah. She could be in there screwing that amber-furred Forest Person with the black ear tips."

"Screwing? Do you really think anything, uh, vaginal is involved?" The Forest People had only one area of anatomical resemblance to people, but that was a prominently displayed embarrassment. He considered himself open minded, but the idea of her letting one of the round, furry, vaguely spider-shaped beings stick its organ into her body in the name of science was a little beyond him.

Jones groaned. "Akil, everyone knows she's been screwing the things; she's said as much herself. She likes to shock people. Like standing in front of me covered with nothing but dirt and scratches and saying 'oh, yes, I did' when I'm open-mouthed and saying 'you couldn't have.'

"But she's serious. She thinks they do it to exchange data encoded in molecules as well as to bond with their group, like the Bonobo. Well, she's bond-

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ed all right. Addicted is what I'd call it. But I don't think the Forest People are doing anything more than following instincts."

"I understand there's some debate about that," Akil said, with some understatement. The dispute concerning the intelligence or not of the Forest People was more like a minor war among the staff. He tried not to take sides, but if there were genuine intelligence on these worlds, it had reacted very slowly to their presence. Or maybe it was just watching.

"Debate, hell! We're just spinning our wheels. She's got all the data because she's the only human being on this planet the Forest People accept, because she's the only one that would ever be willing to do . . . *that!* I don't know why I care."

Akil found himself momentarily speechless at the display of feeling and wondering whether Jones and Fina had some kind of relationship. Meanwhile, he stood in front of Fina's door feeling like an idiot as he confronted her dome's cyberservant.

"I'll try again." He spoke toward the door. "Will you at least tell me if Dr. Fina is in?" Akil asked it. "I don't need to bother her, just tell me if she's in. We are concerned. If she is in and you don't tell me, she may be inconvenienced unnecessarily in our efforts to find out."

"I have been instructed not to answer any questions."

The hell with it, Akil decided, and struck the door with the flat of his hand. It made a low, hollow woody sound. "Sharada Fina!" he yelled. "We just want to know if you're home."

"I'm doing something private," her voice answered. "Please respect my privacy."

"Sorry," Akil said and turned away, embarrassed, then stopped.

Something seemed wrong with her voice, he thought—her intonation or timing. A lack of tension, perhaps, or natural irritation?

"Dr. Jones. . . ."

"I heard, and I don't believe it either. It's a sim. That woman's headed for a disciplinary hearing. Base ops, I'm formally requesting authorization to take control of Dr. Fina's dome system. Explain things to Commander Richards. Hang on, Mateo, I'll be right up there."

The ground base computer acknowledged its instruction. Akil's intuition told him that after the ten minutes of lightspeed delay plus however long it took to get Commander Richards' attention and decision, they would find an empty hut with its robot AI dutifully following its master's instructions to simulate her presence for as long as possible.

Jones came bounding from her swim in long low-gravity strides, large droplets of water still trailing from her lightly tanned skin. She was a big, athletic woman, a bit darker than could be accounted for by the trickle of ultraviolet light that managed its way through the vast, distended Hazian atmosphere. Polynesian roots, he suspected. She was, perhaps, five centimeters taller than Akil's 175.

Like everyone in this hothouse climate, she shaved her head, but her fuzziness indicated the last time must have been a couple of weeks ago. She grabbed a tree to slow herself and her large breasts kept moving in low gravity slow motion for some time after the rest of her body. The effect was surreal and, involuntarily, Akil grinned.

She rolled her eyes upward. "Low gee, Mateo—get used to it. She's not in there, is she?"

He shrugged. "I'd guess not."

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Akil felt his com patch buzz against his skin. "Go ahead," he said.

"Marianne, Akil, Sam Richards here. We've done a minimal override of Sharada's AI instructions to let you in. We've had a little discussion up here, but the upshot is that she's not there and you should probably go after her, promptly, and reel her in if you can. The two of you should be enough—a crowd would probably upset her and the Forest People. Everyone else is out in the field anyway. So you two have got it.

"I'm sure it's not necessary to remind you, but for the record, please avoid doing any violence to the Forest People, even to save Sharada's life; she knew the risks and took them voluntarily. If there is any hostility, we might lose any chance of a peaceful evacuation; not the sort of calling card we wish to leave. If you can't reel Sharada in within a standard day or so, come back and we'll regroup. If you have any questions, handle them locally. Don't wait for another fifteen minutes of lightspeed delay. Okay, you've got the ball now. Get going. Stay in touch with the ground base and good luck. Richards out."

"*We've* got the ball?" Akil said, wondering how he'd gotten himself in that position.

"I guess so. I'll go in," Jones said, ignoring his qualms. She turned to the door. "Open."

This time the door slid open without a fuss.

Fina's hut was full of forest things and standard equipment. Everything was there in perfect order, including her field suit and survival kit. The com patch was lying on the pillow of her web hammock.

"This isn't like her, all neat and everything in order. It's as if she expected people in here before she came back. Chaos!" Jones exclaimed as she touched the field gear. "I wonder if she took *anything* this time?" She seemed worried to Akil.

"Is that dangerous?" he asked. He knew the biochemistry was different enough that people wouldn't be nourishing to Hazian predators. There were some basic compounds in common: water, methane, alcohol, and some sugars, and a few other simple organic compounds, but most of the complex stuff had gone in different directions.

She shrugged and pursed her lips. "Not as far as we can tell, at least for short periods. The biology generally leaves us alone, though you have to watch out for some plants that can't tell us from the natives. There's water if you know where to look and some edible fruit. We can do without the nutritional supplements for a few days."

Akil nodded.

Jones frowned. "But, Mateo, we haven't been here long enough to think that everything *isn't* dangerous. Sharada's given up thinking."

"You think she's in over her head?"

"You better believe it. A lot of people do. She claims she's gained acceptance by mimicking all this touching, stroking, and screwing, and she thinks she's picking up something at least on some level; she likens the process to averted vision—she says she now gets feelings about things after she does it, as if the Forest People are picking up on her chemical language and manipulating her feelings. But when you ask her what she understands, she can't translate."

Akil looked her in the eyes. "It sounds like there were all sorts of warning signals that something like this was going to happen."

She shrugged. "Mateo, a warning has to be exceptional. Alarms that are on all the time are just noise. Uma Weiss is getting ready to recall her, but

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I think that's more because of the time Uma's daughter, Olympia, has been spending with her."

"Olympia's what, twelve? You're not suggesting . . ."

Jones shook her head. "That would be going too far, even for Sharada. Besides, Olympia would never go anywhere without her com. But Uma's getting worried."

Feeling *he* was getting in over his head, Akil wanted to change the subject and gestured to some long pointed wood poles leaned against one of the walls in Sharada's dome. "Those look a lot like spears to me."

Jones shook her head. "No reports of them ever using them that way. I see them sticking out of vines here and there, with Forest People using them as perches, to avoid contact with the vine. If you come in contact with a vine, it starts to envelop you with sap and digest you; that's how the forest stays clean."

"So the Forest People sit on the sticks and don't get enveloped; that sounds intelligent to me."

Jones shrugged. "Look, 'intelligence' is a catch-all for a lot of different talents, and these things might even be able to do biosynthesis faster and better than we can, but for a race that's supposed to be on the verge of intelligence, the Forest People don't seem to interact with us as much as parrots or chimpanzees back home. Of course, I'm more of a biologist than an anthropologist."

Akil shook his head. "I wish we had plausible similicrons."

"In a month or two, we will. We need enough data on behavior and chemistry to fool beings that perceive right down to the chemical level."

"Like dogs?"

"Dogs with hands smart enough to retroengineer the the robots and resent the intrusion. We aren't there yet, and until we get there, our data gathering has to be open and in person."

"And that person is Sharada."

Jones smiled. "Look, I understand that much, about not wanting to leave everything to the robots. Maybe she thinks she can do something before they arrive. She's probably just ten kilometers up at their usual meeting place. It should take us three hours to get there, max. A stroll through the park." Jones smiled. "With a couple of surprises. You'll enjoy it."

"Like this?" He spread his arms to indicate his nakedness.

Jones shrugged. "She does."

Akil felt very uncomfortable about that.

Jones laughed. "You should see your face. I was just kidding. Grab your coveralls and the standard low tech survival stuff. I'll grab her kit, too; she's been away too long and may need the supplies."

Akil was still nervous. "I'm going to ask Stavros to follow up, just in case." The ground base geologist had struck Akil as reliable.

Jones, who had started to gather Sharada's things, turned and shrugged. "Whatever. It shouldn't be necessary. By the way, I'm Marianne." She stuck out a hand.

He took it. "Ah-keel," he said with a forced smile. He was not going to put up with "ackle" for hours on end. He looked into her eyes. He hardly knew her, but she'd been on the surface over a month. Was she someone he could trust?

Her eyes were steady as if she were checking him out as well. "Ten minutes?" she asked.

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He nodded. "Sure. I'll meet you at the north end." Oshatsh vanished behind the limb of Shadow as he said this, and the sounds of the surrounding forest changed as the light dimmed.

Akil returned to his hut and found a fresh set of coveralls; they were light and roomy and as tough as a fabric made from local fibers could be. They had an open weave to allow plenty of circulation, but he started sweating almost as soon as he put them on. He pulled on some lightweight boots made from a stiff open weave with gripping soles made from some hardened local resin.

His field kit was still packed from his previous foray, but he double-checked it. It held nutrient supplement pills, a roll of tissue, a pack of medical patches of various sizes, a polished obsidian knife in a fabric sheath, a mesh water flask lined with a rubbery native leaf, and some other useful things made of materials unlikely to surprise any natives. If, he reminded himself, they really had the wits to be surprised. He slipped the kit onto his back.

Thinking of the nutrient pills, he took a couple and gulped them down with a glass of water. They could forage for bulk; several Hazian fruits and leaves were edible, though of incomplete nutritional value. Thus equipped, he hurried out the door to their rendezvous and waited.

Full day came again as Oshatsh rose from the misty edge of Shadow above, this time on his side of the interforest. His feelings of irritation at having to use some of his time to rectify someone else's screw-up subsided. This expedition had all the makings of a minor adventure and a distraction to keep his mind off his failed marriage. He'd fled his loss, but it followed him in his mind. What had he done so wrong for Kita to discard him like so much excess baggage after sixty-some years?

Stop this, he told himself. Look around you and get your mind on the forest. The brilliant sunlit mountain of green crept up from Haze as if it was growing toward Shadow while he watched, too big to comprehend at a glance. But he knew that under it sat one of the largest volcanoes ever found; the inner pole shield was over twice the linear dimensions of Olympus Mons and the enveloping forest was likewise monstrous. It grew up from the volcano out through the L1 point and spilled down onto the surface of Shadow, a huge hollow tube of long hollow trees and alien vines that bridged the 250 kilometers or so between the twin planets. Even at the edge, the largest "trees" jutted more than a kilometer above the volcanic ash soil.

The biology and structure of these trees, Akil knew, had little in common with trees on Earth, but "tree" was what they looked like and "tree" was what they were called. At ground level, they stood an average of almost a hundred meters apart, like the pillars of some gargantuan temple. The biggest of them resisted even lava flows, and scans showed that some of them extended down through a billion years' worth of built-up rock.

Black, pyramidal mushroom-equivalents jutted two and three meters up from the forest floor reeking both fetid and sweet. Like everything on Haze and Shadow, except where an eruption, storm, or recent impact had caused a kill, it seemed to be a climax forest, or even more than that, a collage of living fossils some of which might be older than multicellular life on Earth.

The trees frequently hosted vines of comparable scale, which apparently did them no harm. Beams of light lanced through the mists of the upper

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canopy. An eerily ape-like pseudosimian cavorted in the vines far above them. Shape prejudice made them seem like relatives, but the consensus was that they were less intelligent than, say, terrestrial opossums.

"Damnedest thing you ever saw, isn't it?" Marianne said, coming up behind him. "Ready?"

"Ready," he replied.

"Grab a walking stick." She gestured to a stand of "beetle plants," whose overlapping iridescent leaves had reminded someone of beetle wing covers.

"Walking sticks? Marianne, it's only a tenth of a gravity up here and these packs mass less than four kilos!"

"Which means a lot less weight to steady you and less friction to stop you—though your momentum is as much as ever. We need the balance aid. Also they're useful for clearing plants away and avoiding close encounters with Hazing life of the slobbering kind. They can't eat us, but they don't all know that. We can't use anything technological but our com electronics in here. But what we can have is a stick. Take one."

Too warm and uncomfortable to argue, Akil just nodded and pulled the stiff leaves off what seemed a suitable staff, though with more effort than he'd have guessed. What was left reminded him of bamboo.

Marianne led, bounding off toward the tree line. He followed.

The forest had a profusion of detail, but all the details looked much alike to Akil.

"How do you know where we're going?" he asked.

"Look for the yellow-brick-fruit tags." Marianne pointed above with her staff. "There's one."

Akil looked for a while and finally spotted a basketball-sized yellow globe hanging from a low branch, patterned with what looked for all the world like alternating rows of yellow bricks. A few more seconds of searching revealed another one about thirty meters ahead.

"Those are native to the outer pole archipelago, so any that you find here, we put there. If you pick them before they get ripe, they seem to last forever. At least they've lasted for the couple of months since we've been here."

"Okay, we follow the yellow-brick-fruit road, then."

Marianne laughed at the reference. "That's the general idea. The Forest People always come down the same base trunk to visit us. We'll assume she went up the same way. The path slants up the aureole wall, then heads straight up the mountain till we get to the first base trunk ring, about ten kilometers from the central caldera. Then we circle north until we hit the right main trunk and ascend about ten kilometers."

An hour into their trek, Akil noticed that the canopy blocked the view above, forming a green and yellow sky. Oshatsh, approaching the horizon now, shone under this, and the shadows of tree trunks became more and more numerous until the effect was one of shafts of sunlight reaching in, rather than individual shadows. But there would be no problem with light until the eclipse. Oshatsh set was a long-extended affair, as light refracted through the least curved horizon of the deep atmosphere—and the vast half globe of a waxing Shadow would light the sky for another hour, though less and less as the umbra of Haze bit into it. He looked for spots, but Oshatsh was a settled old K5 star with a generally placid surface.

For the next hour, the path led up the slope of the volcano around which the forest grew. The terrain was awesome; huge blocks of "ah-ah" lava as

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large as spaceships jutted up through the carpet of debris, massive trunks and vines headed endlessly skyward into the mist, and webs that seemed made of thin vines filled in much of the space. Though he had "flown" through it in virtual reality, clearly any real flight by anything much larger than a duck was impossible. Sticking close to the ground, they got under most of it and lifted up any obstructing web with their walking sticks.

"Where are the spiders for these webs?" he asked.

"The webs *are* the 'spiders,'" Marianne said. "Sort of. Look, we've given these things descriptive common names according to whatever they remind us of from home. But never forget that webs aren't webs, pseudosimians aren't apes, and flying elephants don't act anything like terrestrial elephants. Look, over there. A web's got a butterball."

He looked in time to see a web collapse around what looked like a yellowish soccer ball. The soccer ball had a beak like a parrot's at one end and four ridiculously small, claw-tipped wings arranged around its belly. It squawked once, then vanished from view, as layer after layer of white netting wrapped itself around the struggling creature.

"Vicious," Akil said.

"That's why you don't often see butterballs this deep in the forest."

"Are the nets dangerous?"

"One of them started to wrap me up once, but spit me out before completing the job. I got an interesting pattern of acid burns out of it, but they healed in a couple of days."

"Sounds like fun."

She shook her head. "Cured me of going bare-assed out here. I wrote the page on the nets; how much study did you get in before they sent you down here?"

"Level three on fauna. . . ."

"That was flora, Akil."

"Oh." Unfortunately, Akil had never been that interested in plants.

"Just try not to touch anything but rocks, trees, and blackleaf vines, and you'll be okay. Don't rest on the large elephant-ear leaf vines. They grow around things—quickly, by plant standards."

Using paths filled in by forest debris, they made good time through the ah-ah field. The shade gave little relief from the heat; this deep in the distended Hazian atmosphere, heat was borne by air more than light. Akil brushed by something that looked like a loose ball of spaghetti with long thorns that made a sound like ripping paper as they scratched across his coveralls. He felt a sharp sting as one of them penetrated the weave.

"Porcupine Plant," Marianne said as she saw him pull it out. "The quills can be a nuisance."

He nodded, ruefully.

As they ascended, the lava field changed from the blocky ah-ah into a more smooth, ropy pahoehoe, but on a scale ten times what Akil had seen on Earth. The largest lava tubes under them would be immense, and he savored the thought of exploring them.

What appeared to be a clearing opened beyond the trees to their right, looking at first like a slightly raised meadow. Akil suspected otherwise, and confirmed his suspicions through his com patch. "Marianne, can we hold up a bit?"

"Uh, sure. Whew." She looked like she could use a break. "We're almost there, anyway."

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"Ever been over there?" He nodded toward the clearing.

"No. A crater?"

"The main east vent. We think it's going to be active again in a few days. Want to take a look?"

Marianne took a breath. "Eclipse is coming up. I want to be on the tree by then."

It was getting darker; Akil knew that far above the canopy, the shadow of Haze had started to cover the almost full disk of its sister world. Mid eclipse would bring real night.

"Just a quick look?" he asked.

"Okay. Quickly."

They hopped up the slight rise in a couple of minutes and were rewarded by a kilometer-wide hole in the ground filled with smooth, flat, lifeless rock. Dim in the diffuse fading light, the forest rose around it on all sides like some kind of giant's cathedral. High overhead, individual trunks and vines lost themselves in the misty gloom.

"Chaos, what a place!" Marianne said in a hushed and awed voice.

Akil smiled. Then he saw what he was looking for. "Steam," he said, and pointed to his left. "Over there on the rim." Thin white tendrils rose there, easily visible against the almost-black of the forest.

"Akil . . ."

"What?"

"Down below. In that big wide crack. I see a glow."

Akil stared, couldn't see anything at first, and turned to Marianne to tell her so, but as soon as he averted his vision, the red glow jumped out at him a little further along the crack than he had been looking. "Good eyes! If things go as predicted, that hole could be full of molten lava in a few hours. Okay, we'd best get going."

But Marianne stayed rooted, wide-eyed. "Is this what the main caldera looks like, on a larger scale, of course?"

Akil shook his head. "Radiography shows it's full of debris. No light in there, anyway."

"Okay. Ready to go."

Ten more minutes of bounding uphill brought them to an immense vertical trunk that Akil thought must be thirty meters across. It had two yellow-brick fruits hanging from a lower branch. A glance at the map displayed on his com patch showed them about ten kilometers out from the main caldera. So near, yet so far—but he was on another mission today. He prepared himself for a climb that would be long, hot, and tiring even in low gravity that had noticeably decreased as they ascended closer to the null-gee point between the worlds. But as they approached the tree, he heard a very low pitched moaning.

"Hear that?" Marianne asked. "This is one of the first trunks that actually goes all the way to the L1 point. It's also our elevator."

"Elevator?"

She grinned. "That's the surprise. It's hollow. See that opening? What you hear is a draft blowing into it. In the trunk, the flow rises about seven meters per second." Marianne smiled at him.

It was darker black on lighter, but Akil could make out a notch in the tree twice as big as a person.

Marianne stuck her staff on her backpack and approached the notch from the side. She grabbed a vine on the way and then moved in front of the

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notch, coveralls flapping in the first stiff breeze Akil had seen on Haze. She clearly needed to hold onto the vine to keep herself from being sucked in.

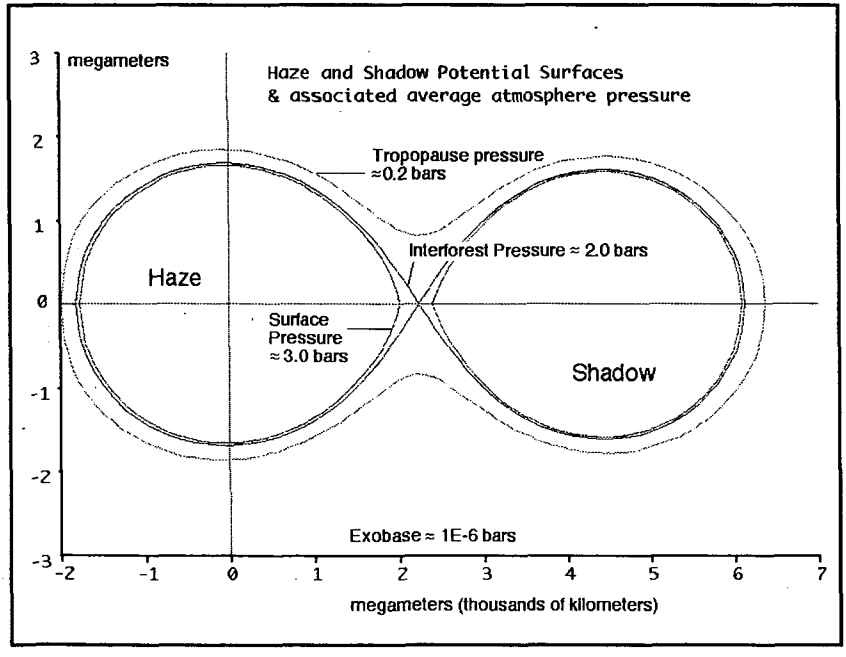
"Cool at last! Oh, this feels good! See you upstairs!" She let go and was gone.

Venturi effect, Akil thought. If the shaft velocity was seven meters per second, and the opening half the area of the shaft, the inlet air stream would be about fourteen meters per second. He thought for a moment. Terminal velocity, where wind resistance equaled weight, for a spread-out person falling on Earth, was around 48 meters/second. In 1/16 gravity, that was reduced by the square root to about 12 meters per second. Then the atmosphere was almost three times as dense; so a light breeze of 4 meters per second should be enough to support his weight here. So a seven-meter-per-second air stream should leave him with a net ascent rate of about three meters per second. Air density would trail off some with altitude, but here between the worlds, gravity would trail off even faster.

He followed Marianne's example and approached from the side, grabbed a vine, then moved into the air stream. He had to hold on hard, but the wind felt wonderful—cooling and drying him.

It was time to go. Still, to just let go and let himself be blown away worried him. What if he hit something? If he was going to hit the inside of the tree opposite the wall, he wanted to hit feet-first, so he grabbed the edges of the opening and lifted his feet.

The wind swung him up like a vertical hanging gate, and he let go when he was horizontal. He brushed some resilient foliage on the top of the notch a couple of times, and then he was floating up in the breeze. Turbulence near the sides of the tube pushed him back toward the center whenever he



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drifted away from it. He could barely sense his motion, but the spot of light below him grew steadily smaller. Then it vanished altogether. Eclipse.

"Marianne?" he said into his com patch, worrying about a collision in the dark. A comforting dim glow came from its screen, light enough for his dark-adapted eyes to see the insides of the hollow tree trunk as he drifted past them, if he didn't stare directly at the screen.

"I'm about a hundred meters above you," she replied.

Plenty of distance. "Just out of curiosity, how do we get off?" he asked.

Marianne laughed. "There's a net blocking the shaft at our stop—no worries; it's a dead one. Now I have some questions for you. Why is it so hot here? With the eclipses, the forest gets half as much light as the rest of this double planet!"

"Convection. This thick air and Oshatsh's redder spectrum means most of the incoming energy gets absorbed on the way down and distributed by air currents. Around the tree, the atmosphere is even deeper because the gravitational potential levels are further apart. That blocks more of the infrared radiation; so you get more greenhouse effect. Still, because of the eclipses and lower pressure, it averages about five kelvins cooler here than Haze's outer pole."

"Could have fooled me. Exercising too much, I guess. Okay, now tell me why Haze and Shadow even *have* an atmosphere. And why haven't Haze and Shadow merged?"

Very good questions, Akil thought; questions that formed much of the motivation for the expedition in the first place. There were plenty of models, all with a lot of free parameters and some good guesses, none of which was proven.

"We're still working on it; we've only been here for a few months, after all. I can tell you this much; because the atmosphere is so thick, water and any other hydrogen compounds tend to freeze out many kilometers below the mesosphere. So it's almost all dry nitrogen, oxygen, and helium above the stratosphere, and largely helium atoms with only a few nitrogen and oxygen molecules when you get to the top of the atmosphere where molecules might escape.

"That's the exobase, and its temperature is about 23 Celsius below freezing. To escape Haze and Shadow, atoms only need to move about 1900 meters per second, like on Earth's moon. But the thermal velocity of neutral nitrogen or oxygen atoms at that temperature averages less than four hundred meters per second, so they pretty much stay put.

"Ion pickup is another matter, but Oshatsh has a lot less ultraviolet than Sol and doesn't create a lot of ions. Nor does it have much solar wind, and what it does have is largely neutral. Still, there's a significant loss. But there are significant reservoirs of volatiles, too. Big oceans and large ammonia clathrate deposits at the bottom of those oceans, mainly along the orthomeridian."

"The what?"

"The great circle equidistant from the inner and outer poles; it's at right angles to the prime meridian and goes through the north, south, east, and west poles. The term was invented back in the twenty-second century by the geographers of tide-locked worlds."

Marianne sighed audibly. "Got it. So we think Haze and Shadow *are* losing their atmosphere, they just haven't had time to lose most of it."

"Yeah, more or less. Chandra thinks the time constant is something like

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five billion years. Sun-Oh used a different method and got three billion, but Oshatsh is easily eight billion years old, so there's something they don't understand going on here. That's why we do these things, I guess. Haze and Shadow combined still have about two and half times as much atmosphere, by mass, as Earth does, and must have started with a lot more."

"I see. Now," Marianne asked, "why haven't they crashed together?"

"We don't know. Tidal perturbations and friction should have done the job long ago. But there are a couple of contrary influences; you notice how it's always cloudier on the trailing hemisphere?"

"Yeah, come to think of it."

"Well, the greater reflectance on that side provides a small net push in a spin-up direction. Also, the ongoing mass loss decreases the gravitational attraction. The geometry of the land gives a tidal slosh frequency that's out of phase with rotation, so that drag effect is tiny as well. Finally, the forest itself may pump-up the rotation like a Landis tether, by contracting slightly during eclipses and relaxing otherwise."

"The Gaia effect?"

Akil shook his head. "Thermal if anything. Anyway, the length of the day may actually be increasing, but we haven't been able to find ancient coastal tide lines because all the land surface is volcanic and generally younger than the hundred million years or so of data we'd need. There's essentially no fossil record."

"Tell me about it," Marianne said, a hint of exasperation in her voice. "We biologists have nothing to explain evolution here, either, or where the interforest came from. Those volcanoes look weird, don't they? Like big nipples. Why?"

Akil laughed. "That one I can explain. It's the sharply curved potential surfaces between the worlds. If you measure the mountain surface against the local mean potential surface, they have roughly the same slope as Olympus Mons, Mauna Loa, or any other shield volcano in the known universe. What low gravity gives in vertical scale, it takes back in a reduced coefficient of friction. Remember, it has to get down to zero in the center where their gravities cancel each other, about a hundred and sixty kilometers up. It's like the two planets were trying to suck each other's guts out.

"On the interforest, my guess is that the shield volcano on Shadow's inner pole once reached almost to the L1 point. Surface gravity would have been down to less than one percent of Earth's at the surface. Trees of ten or fifteen kilometers height would have been structurally feasible, and their tops could easily have hung over into Haze's gravity well and grown down to Haze."

"Well . . ." Marianne sounded unconvinced. "The problem with that is that the main interforest trunks are more closely related to the local vines than the tall trees of the perimeter. It might have started as air weed at the L1 point that hung lower and lower until it touched the ground. Before you tell me the L1 point isn't stable going in or out, we've thought of that. The updrafts from the inner poles are enough to keep things up there. A kind of Sargasso air sea formed between the inner poles. The wonder to me is that the forest survives the eruptions."

Akil formed a basket with his fingers. "It forms a kind of natural Hoytether—an interlocking tube of branches that can be cut in many places without weakening. The occasional lava flows burn away only a few trunks at a time, and there are centuries or millennia between eruptions at the

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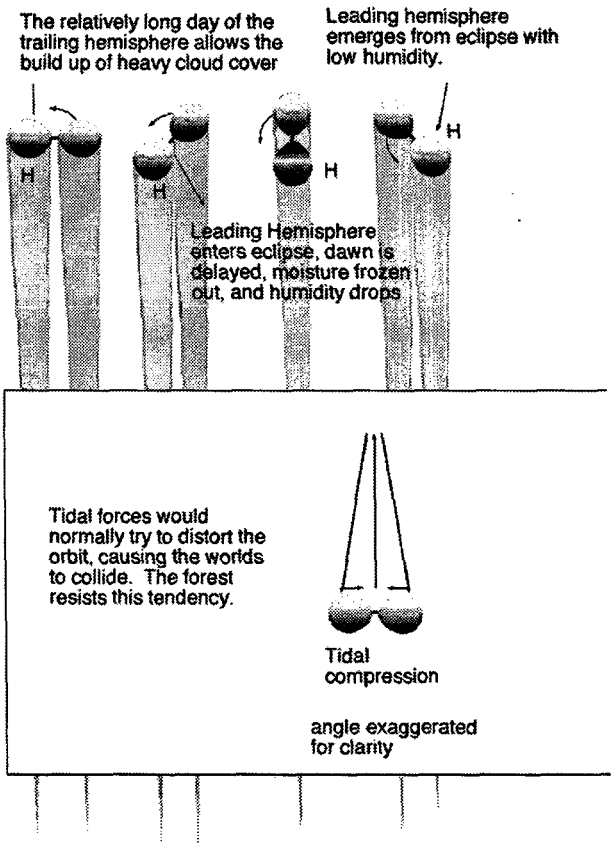
The relatively long day of the trailing hemisphere allows the build up of heavy cloud cover
Leading hemisphere emerges from eclipse with low humidity.
H
H
H
H
Leading Hemisphere enters eclipse, dawn is delayed, moisture frozen out, and humidity drops
Tidal forces would normally try to distort the orbit, causing the worlds to collide. The forest resists this tendency.
Tidal compression
angle exaggerated for clarity

same place; the forest regenerates faster than it gets cut. If Sharada really can communicate with the Forest People, they might be able to tell us something about the frequency and effects of past eruptions."

"Don't count on it." Marianne said. "They may be as smart as chimps in some areas, but overall, they've gotten nowhere in at least the last twenty to thirty million years. That's about all the further we can trace them so far."

"You really don't think much of what Sharada's doing, do you?"

"I don't know, of course. But it sometimes seems to me like she's found an excellent excuse to indulge in what most folks would call a perversion." She sighed. "Please don't tell her I said that. I could be wrong, and I'd like to put things back together with her if and when this ever gets over."

"Back together?"

"We're lovers, Akil. Or were before the Forest People took over."

Marianne preferred women? Akil's thoughts about her skidded to a halt, and he felt almost relieved. This was dicey enough without such complications.

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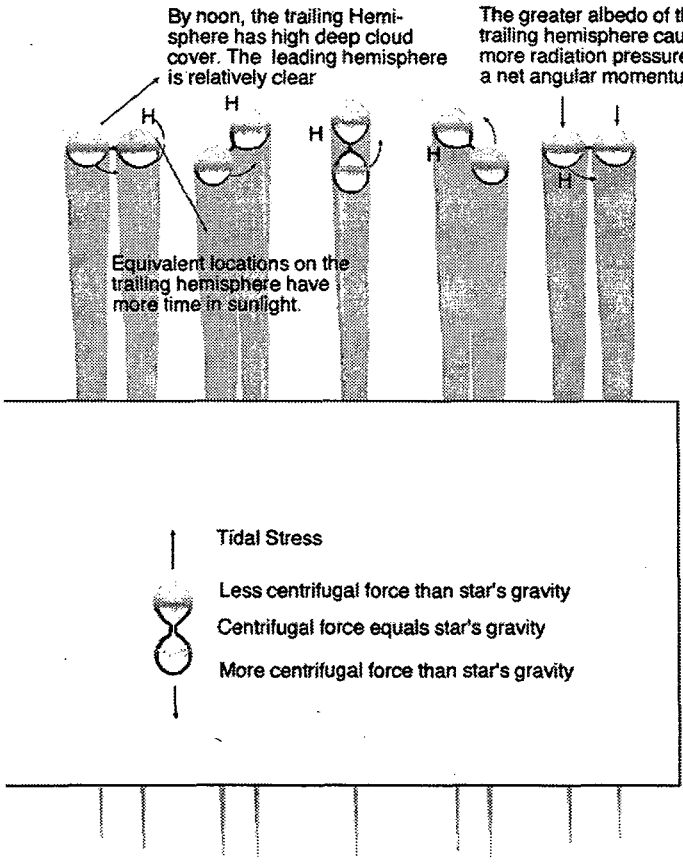
By noon, the trailing Hemisphere has high deep cloud cover. The leading hemisphere is relatively clear
The greater albedo of the trailing hemisphere causes more radiation pressure and a net angular momentum input.
H
H
H
H
H
Equivalent locations on the trailing hemisphere have more time in sunlight.
Tidal Stress
Less centrifugal force than star's gravity
Centrifugal force equals star's gravity
More centrifugal force than star's gravity

"Uh, sorry about the break-up. But it seems from out here that you might be better off."

"Maybe, but I sure don't feel that way. Akil, when it comes to sex, she has this uninhibited go-for-it attitude that *sends* me! Our own communication was so great we really didn't have to talk about it, we just stare in each others eyes that way and then, uh!, I'm gone! What she did to me was just so damn wonderful. I want it back. Got the picture?"

Why, Akil wondered, did people like to dump their private lives on him? He'd never thought of himself as a "father confessor" type, but people kept doing it. He hardly knew Marianne.

"I see," he said, struggling to think of anything else to say. He had cared deeply for Kita and certainly had found her lovemaking pleasant enough, but the intensity of feeling Marianne was describing was foreign to him and didn't sound very safe. More importantly, the relationship could complicate their efforts to persuade Sharada to return. What had Richards been thinking when he sent Marianne after her? Or was that why he, Akil, was along?

"Uh, maybe things will work out," he finally offered.

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"Not bloody likely, is it?" Marianne said. "Well, we've arrived."

Akil saw a tiny spot of light far above him; eclipse must be over. In a minute the spot of light grew large enough that he could see Marianne lying in a net above him. He felt unsettled as his eyes contradicted his inner ears and told him he was falling onto the net and her. He missed her by inches but the net stretched and pinched them together. It was a chance contact, but he was feeling a little sorry for her about her apparent loss of Sharada's affection, and gave her what he intended to be just a brief and friendly hug.

She clung, and his heart started beating a little faster. They looked at each other seriously for a second, and he had to fight off a moment of instinctual desire. But she disengaged wordlessly and scrambled off the net and out through the hole.

What had happened there, he thought? She was apparently oriented toward other women and he really didn't like her that much anyway. So why?

"Akil! Come out, look at this!"

He scrambled out of the net to the hole in the tree and looked into an utterly alien environment. The vegetation was thinner up here, with shafts of light lancing through the huge spaces to illuminate a riot of color. Indescribable smells assaulted him.

The hole led onto a huge branch, almost as thick as the main trunk, that led to the next main trunk, perhaps three hundred meters away. He climbed out against an incoming air stream; the true exhaust of this hollow trunk must still be many kilometers above them. He looked around. Huge overlapping iridescent leaves—or were they flower petals?—grew in twin rows out of straight spikes that seemed to grow from the main trunks themselves. Outrageous red flowers that vaguely resembled Chinese lanterns ten meters across hung from impossibly thin vines that reached up to branches and vines overhead. They were lined with Japanese-fan leaves black as midnight, translucently thin, and at least two meters in radius from the vine. His mouth opened wide; virtual training had done nothing to prepare him for this holistic experience. Occasional weird sounds made the unearthly silence all the more noticeable by contrast. In the distance, a tone-deaf idiot tried to tune a violin. Something hit a gong so huge and low-pitched that he felt the vibrations more then heard them. The call of a tortured cat punctured the relative peace in six-note clusters of tonal agony.

Huge, strange shapes flitted in the deeper murk, and the sight of familiar "spider nets" hanging between close vines and branches almost reassured him.

"Down here, Akil."

He scrambled to the edge of the "branch," clinging to its rough soft "bark," and looked down. He spotted Marianne's dark blue coveralls a hundred and fifty meters or so below him, against what looked like a platform woven of some light sticks. A sky-eel nest, he thought, remembering his orientation. Things would fall on it and the sky-eels would eat them, dead or alive. This one was clearly uninhabited for now. Marianne was holding a light yellow something.

"How . . . ?"

"Just jump! Jump *down,* right at me—otherwise it will take you forever to fall this far."

Intuition screamed *no* at him, but he realized she was right. Still, he couldn't make himself jump down very hard, and he seemed to float down

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like an oversized leaf in the giant wood. He protected his face with his arms just before hitting the platform and bounced up gently, forgetting to hang on.

Marianne grabbed him, pulled him down and showed the cloth to him. He recognized it immediately. "Human coveralls. Maybe Sharada wore them after all, at least this far."

"They're too small." Marianne shook her head and looked grim. "I think she has Olympia with her."

"Uma Weiss's daughter?" The implications of that took a moment to sink in. Suddenly, despite the heat, Akil shivered. "Did you tell base?"

"Yeah. Olympia's not there. Didn't leave word with her mother, either. She told one of the other children that they were going to talk to the 'caretaker,' whoever that is."

"I'd guess the 'caretaker' is one of the Forest People."

"And I think you'd be right. Uma is upset."

No doubt, Akil thought. "Are they sending help?" he asked. "There's no sign of anyone here, and talk about a needle in a haystack. . . ." He gestured around him. "I think it's time to forget about contaminating the Forest People with technology and fly some people and surveillance robots up."

Marianne looked frightened. "That's what I thought, but they don't agree. Not even Uma. They're worried about destroying the possibility of the Forest People developing as a non-technological culture; that's a real hot item in exosociology. So another low-tech climbing party is on the way, but they want us to start searching around here." She sighed. "I want a robot. I feel bloody damned expendable, right now."

Akil reached for his com patch, then thought better of it. This woman was far senior in ground experience, and if *her* advice wasn't being heeded, his would just be so much noise. He thought briefly about just sitting tight and waiting for reinforcements. Then he thought about the twelve-year-old. "Where should we search?"

"This is the lowest of the Forest People's gathering sites we know about, so we should start on this plane, and work our way up." She looked at her com patch. "This group doesn't stray too far from their main trunk. So we don't have to search the whole forest."

"Got it."

"We're near the outer edge now. Suppose we work our way into the forest core, go up a hundred meters or so, back on out to the edge, up a hundred or so, and repeat? Unless you have a better idea."

Akil just shook his head.

Marianne pointed up and to her right. A twisted "rope" of vines with black leaves about the size and shape of elephant ears hung in a catenary toward the next main trunk inward. "Can you jump up to that? I'm pretty sure I can. Then we can go hand over hand."

They jumped and grabbed. The leaves obviously wouldn't allow a safety loop around it to slide freely, so they tied themselves together; in one-sixteenth gravity, either one of them could support the weight of both with one hand gripping the vine. Thus secured, they headed inward, got themselves into a rhythm, and swung along like a pair of gibbons. They kept going through a night that, lit by Shadow's reflected light, was not much worse than deep twilight except for the pitch dark total eclipse of Shadow. They reached the edge of the core in three hours. Nothing.

Akil called Stavros to report the negative results.

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"We haven't left yet," Stavros replied. "We still have to discuss tactics, technology impact, and leadership with everyone. On top of that, a new vent has opened up just west of the base; the lava is very gassy, liquid, and moving fast. We're waiting for others to get in from the field and sort their stuff just in case. Going to be at least another hour. I'd be up to you already, except now I gotta coordinate with everyone else. Sorry, buddy. All I can do is wish you luck."

Akil thanked him and told Marianne.

She nodded and stared inward. There were no leaves here. "Less light in here than a full moon gives back on Earth," she said, glancing at her com patch. "Dry, too. Are your lips a little rougher? Feel any cooler?"

He took inventory. Indeed, his lips were dry and over the last kilometer or so he had felt much more comfortable. "Yes. That's as it should be, warm air rises from the planet through the core toward the L1 point. It's actually two kelvins warmer in here than out near the canopy, but the humidity is down so much it feels cooler."

"Hmm. I've got an idea for what these vines are."

"Roots?"

"Yeah, but going the opposite direction of what you think. Plenty of food here, plenty of oxygen. But no water. This—" she pointed to a long black twisty fibrous thing "—I think is an aqueduct for that." She pointed to a bumpy, house-sized nodule growing on a piece of wood as thick as a ship.

"Upside down and inside out," Akil commented.

"Yeah. Like some other things I can think of. What's all the way in?"

"The inner two kilometers form a hollow tube, according to radar data, up to the Sargasso area."

"I'd like to stop and take a look at the inner wall, there may be . . ."

He held up a hand to stop her. "We're on a mission, Marianne."

She stared at him for a second, then sighed. "Okay, what do we do? Climb up half a kilometer and head out?"

Akil nodded. "That's a plan."

She started up, then stopped dead. "Akil . . ."

"I see it."

Off to their left, back in the direction of the core, one of the Forest People's spears protruded from a vast dead trunk. But some ancient strain had split this trunk lengthwise, creating a crack almost two meters wide that ran its length from the dark below to the dark above. The crack ran just above the spear and cut into the wood so as to expose almost two meters of embedded shaft.

"We can get to it—that way." She pointed at a "root" about ten meters overhead that crossed the open area between them and the split trunk.

"Time, Marianne."

"I know. Just a few minutes, *please*." She launched herself at the root, caught it, and swung over to the find. "The shaft is just like the ones in Sharada's hut."

But it was not the shaft that caught Akil's attention. It was the collection of alien bones embedded in the woodish fiber around it. "That *was* used as a spear, it seems."

Marianne nodded, quietly, and examined the remains. "The vines have evolved a way to get nutrients up here. But some parts of the bone are apparently indigestible." She grabbed a hunk of the trunk and it crumbled in her hand. She looked up and shook her head. "I don't understand."

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"What?"

"It's been partly mineralized—desiccation, ages of dust, volcanic fumes, and an occasional drenching have caused most of the organic material to be replaced with silicates. That can happen in thousands of years on Earth, but here . . . look, there's the central void."

Akil looked up over the trunk, into a vast gloomy emptiness. He must have stared for ten seconds before the importance of what she said registered on him. "This is *really* old to be this far in."

"How old?"

Akil looked at his com patch, his eyes selecting his way through a data tree. "The central trunk vines reach this thickness in about ten thousand years. Eventually eruptions take both ends and the vine dies. New growth pushes the dead old growth slowly toward the center where it either falls into one of the calderas or gets taken by the wind up to the center. The process takes forever; the latest models would require something on the order of a billion years."

"A billion. Akil, this is a pseudosimian skeleton, and it's exactly like, as far as I can tell, the pseudosimian below. Look, instead of a single backbone, the cycloskeleta have a loop of some sixty bones. In interforest, avian, and oceanic life, the circular plan held; and in the Forest People it was retained with a vengeance." She drew her fingers along what seemed to be a bony railroad track. "But in the pseudosimians and other Hazian ground life, this loop had stretched into something not entirely un-spinelike except for its double hump. But . . ."

"But?"

"If the pseudosimians are this old, it should have merged by now, fused into a true spine, but . . ."

Akil was no expert in evolution, but he got the point. "Stasis."

"A *billion* years of stasis. Akil, that's strange for that kind of life form. Very strange."

"Unpunctuated equilibrium? Living fossils?"

"You're going to think I'm crazy, but I'm beginning to wonder if it's deliberate. As if the Forest People don't want any competition developing."

Akil shivered despite his coveralls. "Are you suggesting it was culled? But it looks the same. . . ."

He fell silent as he realized that bones told only part of the story.

"Look at where it was, Akil." She touched the crumbling bone of the ancient pseudosimian. "It was like us. It was exploring. A behavioral mutant, if you like."

Akil shivered again. "We aren't supposed to be here either, are we?"

Marianne looked into the gloom. "No."

Akil touched her. "Look, we'd best get back to trying to find Sharada and Olympia."

"I suppose so. But that seems so futile and this is important." She sighed. "Well, it's recorded and uploaded now. Someone else can do the follow-up." She looked up to a vine perhaps two hundred meters above them. "Up?"

The journey back to the canopy took about fifty minutes. The search became routine. A journey to the core and back took an hour and a half. There they would check in and wait out an eclipse. Then they would ascend and make another such journey. They did this three times, returning to the "elevator" trunk each time.

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The last time, they found another hole in the tree, with its characteristic in-draft.

"We've gone up a floor, it seems."

"Uh-huh. One floor. Let's check in. Akil, I'm exhausted."

"Me too." He raised his wrist and spoke to his com patch. "Stavros?"

He answered immediately. "Everything's assembled and we should be about to start climbing. Finally. We'll have to detour about twenty kilometers around the lava, so it's going to take a while." The man's irritation showed and Akil could only imagine the discussions and politics involved. "Why don't you guys stand down through a couple of eclipses and get some sleep. You've done what you can. We should be up to you by then. By the way, don't try to return to Haze base, it's not there anymore."

"Sorry I missed it," Akil answered. "You're right. I hate to leave the needle in the haystack, but when we're this damn tired, we're probably not your best observers."

"Roger that. Marianne, take care of him. Good try, both of you. I'll see you soon. Stavros out."

Akil turned to Marianne. "Net hammocks from a vine?"

"Yeah. But use dead vines for suspension. You don't want our good line enveloped by the vine. You take this side of the tree, I'll take the other. I need to hang my ass over a branch for a bit."

Akil got out of his coveralls, clipped them to the hammock's net roof to air, and found a hole in a branch to squat over. That done, he cut a couple of vines from which to hang his hammock, tied them into loops, hung the hammock from the loops and crawled in just as the eclipse hit.

It was a Shadow eclipse, and maximum; only a slight band of refracted twilight fell on the smaller world. Akil caught a glimpse of this ghostly arc through a hole in the high haze, and of a bright star or planet near it; that was the first celestial object other than Shadow he had seen from the surface of Haze. Of course, he thought as he slipped into sleep, he was no longer on the surface of Haze.

Akil woke from a dreamless sleep to the almost perfect silence of the interforest in Shadow eclipse and shuddered a little as he looked through the web of his hammock down further than he could see in the gloom. He was safe; even if he fell, he could body-glide to a vine before he was falling fast enough to hurt himself, but his Earth instincts didn't let him feel safe over that void. He called Marianne. She didn't answer. He checked her location, and the nav utility told him she was several kilometers below his position. What? Surely, if she'd seen something, she would have called him before leaving.

"Marianne?" he called.

No answer. Had she fallen somehow and not managed to catch herself? He swung himself out and headed for the other side of the tree. There was her hammock, empty. He turned back to get his things, jerked and froze.

There, only a few centimeters from his nose, floated a huge, wet, constantly blinking eye. Its translucent nictating membrane closed and opened vertically as if driven by some alien pulse. In the surrounding darkness, it looked disembodied. He shuddered and tried to back away.

With surprising strength, corrugated fingers grabbed his wrists and legs. Akil pulled his hand free, but his com patch stayed in the Forest Person's hand. The Forest Person tucked it in some unseen pouch or pocket and

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grabbed Akil's wrist again before Akil could think. The hand seemed to stick to his wrist like glue. It tugged painfully on his skin as he tried to pull away.

"Marianne! Help!"

A dozen other arms gripped him immediately. He struggled, but, while he seemed much stronger than they were individually, they didn't let go and thus each of his arms was burdened by two or three times his own mass of Forest People.

He'd heard no report of any Forest Person ever having harmed, or even approached, a person except for Sharada. But the hands that weren't holding him, or carrying them all to who knows where, were feeling him all over, poking, prodding, even, it seemed caressing. They seemed particularly interested, if that was the word, in his groin and his spine.

Their smell reminded him of wet dog, and he could feel their warm furry bodies next to him with that wet stuff at their centers, erect and probing. He screamed.

It made no difference, so, with effort, he suppressed the panic and concentrated on observing the anatomy and behavior of the Forest People. Their plump, furry bodies filled the middle of the cycloskeletal ring like a bubble of flesh with the head and five arms spaced around it with almost mathematical precision.

He examined the short necked Hazian head and its sense organs. It was supposed to be a specialized limb; the other limbs had homologous vestigial organs; he remembered pictures of a very primitive form Hazian sea creature that looked something like a six-legged starfish with mouths, tentacles and eye spots at the end of each arm.

The jaws on the Forest Person's head were also homologous to the fingers on the other hands, he recalled. The brain was back within the ring, deep beneath its leathery flesh, inaccessible to whatever damage he might wish to do. An esophagus ran beneath the muscles to the central body. A general purpose cloaca opened next to the penis-like organ that was the cause of all the problems.

Akil tried very hard to ignore the fact that this part of the Forest Person in front of him was now very elongated and firm and trying to insert itself into Akil's navel. He felt a sudden sharp pain there and cried out involuntarily. The organ withdrew, with large low-gravity drops of Akil's blood clinging to it. Akil glanced down; the wound seemed minor and, thanks to centuries of genetic engineering, would heal rapidly. But that didn't keep him from shuddering.

What the hell would they be doing to Marianne? "Let me go!" he yelled, uselessly.

The Forest People just kept climbing. Their camp vanished in the haze of mist and leaves below, then, in the next Shadow eclipse, he lost the trace of vine trunks he was trying to memorize to find his way back. They never let go of him, twice substituting in fresh carriers on the fly. In the darkness, which seemed not to affect the Forest People at all, they entered another elevator trunk. When they finally left it, the eclipse was over and he was weightless in the forest between the worlds.

In spite of his situation, he gazed around in awe. The distance between tree trunks had increased to several hundred meters and vines dominated the vegetation with their characteristic elephant-ear leaves. The air felt noticeably thinner, more crisp and dry, though not really cooler. Light breezes

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carried ridiculously huge objects with them; a dead branch the size of an aircraft and in the distance, a free drifting web—a flying carnivorous plant, no less.

He saw his first "flying elephant." Until it took off at their presence it was almost perfectly camouflaged, with its "ears" looking like leaves and its trunk like a vine boll. While its body was of pachydermic proportion, the thin legs ended in hands that looked like they'd been stolen from the front legs of a huge frog. Its "ears" rippled and scooted it along like the wings of a manta ray.

They towed him to a tree branch where four of his captors anchored themselves and held him there. The one in front, who had attempted to do whatever to his navel, apparently had other business. Within minutes of the anchoring, one of the side holders was replaced, following the pattern that had been established since his capture.

He first thought that this was the time to try to get away—while grips were being changed. But no, they would be especially vigilant then and, in addition, would have a five-to-one numerical advantage instead of their normal four-to-one. Patience. At least they didn't seem to want to kill him immediately.

He could feel a gentle warm dry breeze flow past him; the core wind, he assumed. Strange new scents tickled his nose. The air pressure here was down to twice Earth normal, and the partial pressure of oxygen down to two-thirds. The lower concentration would make the effects of that worse, should he exert himself. Should he get the opportunity. He made himself relax and took deeper breaths; he knew his body would acclimatize soon enough.

He wondered about the time and found a spot of Oshatsh light to watch; fortuitously it seemed to run along a distant vine. Twilight engulfed the interforest; a Haze eclipse. He couldn't see either world from this position, but a Shadow eclipse would have been darker. The Haze eclipse twilight brightened into crescent Haze light after a period of time he knew to be about twenty minutes, but seemed longer. Then day broke and he found his spot of light again, far to his right. The rotation of the worlds was so rapid that he could almost see it creep along the vine.

As the spot reached a major branch on "its" vine, one of his back captors was exchanged. Shortly thereafter, it began to darken, gradually reaching the pitch black of a Shadow eclipse.

That made it just over three hours between captor switches, he thought. Possibly, none of the original group that he had struggled against were now holding him. Indeed, the grips on his wrists and ankles were noticeably less tight. In that he felt a ray of hope.

He gathered more information about his surroundings. The "day" following the Haze eclipse was significantly dimmer than the previous one, so he must be well on the eastern side of the interforest. There was no immediate way that he could use that information, but it made him feel better to have a rough idea of where he was.

An occasional "spear" protruded from vines at various lengths; the longest from slight mounds in the vine's surface. The thought of what grisly remains might lie beneath those mounds sent shivers through him. But he thought the spears might be fairly easy to dislodge, or break off. He could use one of them as a staff.

A Forest Person, or even a pseudosimian trying to escape, would seek to

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get all hands and feet on the tree trunk and scramble away. He would make no effort to do that. Instead, he would try to coil his legs between him and the tree and jump.

His bowels were crying for relief. Would they let him squat? He would make a virtue of necessity, if so.

He tried to assume a fetal position, but gently. He did not want to display the full Earth-gravity strength of his muscles yet. They resisted. To establish a warning signal, he hyperventilated, then he farted. Apparently, his rear captors didn't like that and adjusted their position.

He tried to squat again. This time they allowed it, and he tried to pass some fecal matter, but, straining his abdominal muscles, could only produce a small pellet that floated nauseatingly near to him. One of the Forest People swatted it away. Maybe that would be enough for them to get the idea.

The back captors moved him up the tree a bit after this and placed his nether end over a hole in the branch out of which some vines he hadn't seen before grew. Akil bided his time. His best chance, he thought, would be about two thirds of the way through the brightest part of the day; when he could see almost as well as they could, when at least the one that had been there the longest might be a little fatigued, and before the relief was in the area.

Another Haze eclipse and he had his spot back. When it was about halfway to the point where the captor shift change had occurred, he hyperventilated, then started to squat. This time there was little resistance. He concentrated on making a supreme physical effort. As he performed his functions, with little problem this time, he imagined his captors relaxed a bit. He felt the vines move under his seat, probing for every last bit of the organic matter he was donating, and he wanted to swat them away in utter revulsion. But he suppressed the reaction with the knowledge that they were doing him a service.

Finished, he relaxed himself completely, going as limp as he could, and took a couple of deep breaths. Then he exploded, slamming his feet against the trunk with every ounce of strength in his body and tore free of two of his captors as he shot into the air.

Two came with him, but using his arms to get his legs in position, he managed to kick them away as well, leaving great red welts where their hands had been. Never mind, he was free. The Forest People left on the tree were madly scrambling through the foliage to where they thought he would land, but the velocity of his jump was, he hoped, far too high for them to catch him that way.

He straightened his body in an approximation of an airfoil and glided toward a large vine trunk. That cost him some speed, but appeared to work. Anyway, he came close enough to catch some of the vine's foliage and swung himself around to its surface. Using the foliage to hold himself down as he folded his legs under himself again, he targeted a likely spear and jumped for it, just as the posse was about to catch up to him.

He flew to it easily. Getting the knack of this, he thought to himself.

"Akil! Akil!"

Marianne. He resisted the urge to look around and concentrated on his landing, and grabbed the vine trunk with his hands. He hauled himself along its smooth surface to the spear with his fingernails and, like a Forest Person, used it to hold himself to the vine, but floating above its surface.

"Marianne! I hear you but I can't see you."

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"Above you, to the right! No, your left. Above to your left!"

He stared and stared. Then he caught a motion; Marianne struggling with her captors.

He couldn't pull the spear out, but was able to snap it off near where it entered the vine, then grab its stub in time to keep himself from floating helplessly away.

Forest People flowed toward him from every direction—no time to think. He chose a tree branch near Marianne and jumped hard. Holding the spear shaft in his hand gave him a feeling of confidence that he hadn't had in a day.

Be wary, he told himself. Be doubly careful when you find yourself thinking you're hell on wheels. He planned as he glided toward the tree. He would be only ten meters or so from Marianne and her captors. Also, assuming they didn't move, he could approach them from the side. Could he hit the group hard enough to launch them all into free fall, where they could be kicked off one by one? Perhaps. At least he might stun them and be able to jump again with Marianne and whatever came with her. The Forest People could defeat that easily by moving, but he hoped that what he was doing was sufficiently unusual that they wouldn't anticipate it.

In mid air he wondered why they weren't any smarter than they were, but had no time to complete the thought as the tree rushed up at him.

He belly flopped onto the trunk and grabbed on with his hands, then scrambled to find a good takeoff point. Marianne's captors had noticed him and were starting to move, but they were too late. He aimed a little ahead of the way they were going and jumped with everything he had.

"Oof!" Marianne grunted as he hit one of her side captors square on. The Forest People hung on to the vine but he apparently stunned the one he hit enough that he was able to pull it off and fling it away into the air. That freed one of Marianne's arms, and between the two of them, they were able to dispatch her remaining captors, who flailed helplessly in the air.

No, not so helplessly; they could swim in it, and they were swimming back toward them.

Akil felt a wave of exhaustion. Exercising too hard in too little oxygen, he thought.

Forest People were flowing toward them in all directions.

"Jump," he said. "Across the clearing." They did so together, but without much velocity, and ended up coasting slowly through a hollow in the wood with knots of silent Forest People staring at them here and there.

Akil breathed deeply and asked his heart to beat a little more slowly, trying to stave off hypoxia.

"Thanks," Marianne said. "I owe you one."

Akil looked at her. She was dirty, had numerous bruises and scratches, patches of dried blood. He probably looked a lot like she did, he thought.

"Yeah, I'm a mess," she said. "They did it to me and they knew exactly what to do, damn Sharada. They knew exactly what to do and it hurt, oh, did it hurt."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Just think about Olympia. That kind of puts it in perspective."

Akil looked up. They were drifting toward a branch filled with Forest People. "Damn. Here we are, representatives of a vast civilization with robot slaves and starships, falling into the hands of our enemies utterly naked and with nothing but a broken stick to show for our heritage."

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"We have each other," Marianne said.

"So we do . . . so we do! Marianne, we can jump off each other. Put our feet together, coil up, hanging on to the spear for tension, then let go and jump."

She shuddered. "No way to do this without splitting up?"

He thought hard and shook his head. "I think it's that or get caught again."

She closed her eyes for a moment. "Okay." She grabbed the spear and they got their feet together. "Where do we jump and then what do we do?"

"Pick a trunk and steer for it, like you were sky diving. Then jump from it toward that big old gray trunk toward the core."

"It's not a tree trunk, it's a leafless scavenger vine. Never mind. I'll meet you there."

There wasn't much time, Akil thought. Their momentum was bringing them closer and closer to the branch full of waiting Forest People.

"You keep the spear," Akil said. "I'll let go on the count of three, then jump."

"Ready."

He looked up. They were only about ten meters from the Forest People and there was no time for "one" and "two." "Three, jump!" he shouted.

It wasn't a work of art, but they both shot off in opposite directions. Akil had the shorter distance and had to pick out a landing spot quickly. But he was getting to be an old hand at it. He absorbed the shock with his legs bent and slightly off center so that he rotated onto the vine and could grab it. Then he set himself, made a mighty leap across the clearing toward the scavenger vine, and looked for Marianne. She crashed more than landed on her target and was agonizingly slow getting herself oriented. Forest People swarmed toward her.

"Come on, come on," Akil yelled.

At the last minute, she jumped toward their target, but it was a good, strong jump.

Akil bent his body to sail past his target and land on a smaller nearby trunk. The Forest People started to swarm toward him. He waited until he could see forest glinting off their big wet eyes before he jumped for the rendezvous point. The decoy worked and he arrived about the same time as Marianne, ahead of the Forest People.

"Where to now?" he asked.

"We don't see Forest People in the core," she said. "Too dry. Let's try that."

"Three quick jumps and we should distance them pretty well," Akil said. "There's a trunk with a split in it, branches coming off in a kind of K shape, up to your left?"

"Got it. You go first."

They didn't stop until they were so deep in the central gloom that it was difficult to see. Everything around them seemed hot, dry and mummified.

"I think we can rest now." Marianne said. "I don't think there's anything alive down here. We must be fifty kilometers below the green line."

Akil, exhausted, simply nodded.

Marianne looked at him as if she wanted to say something more, but apparently thought better of it. Finally she said, "Can you sleep first? I'm too wound up. I'll keep watch. I'll take my turn the eclipse after next."

That would give him about four hours. He felt like he needed it. "Sleeping in microgravity without anything for a restraint is easier said than

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done, unfortunately." He tried to pull a vine off to tie himself down, but it crumbled to dust in his hand.

Inspired, Marianne brought the butt of her staff down hard on the smallish branch they had chosen for their stopping place and was rewarded when a big piece of it caved in. "Hollow," she said. The hollow proved less than a meter wide and the "wood" inside seemed almost polished. Akil was able to wedge across it to hold himself with his back to the wood. Exhaustion did the rest.

"Akil?"

He cleared his head. This time there had been no dreams about Kita or anyone else. "I'm awake."

"Second eclipse. Look below. It's glowing."

Instead of pitch dark there was a deep, diffuse kind of redness. Even this far up, the air had a tinge of sulfur in it.

"The eruption is still in progress—I can smell it. No escape that way."

"Could we make it to Shadow?" She looked into his eyes.

This was a test for her, he thought. Hell, it was a test for both of them. "I haven't given up on Sharada and Olympia," he told her quietly.

"Look, we seem to be safe here, but there's no food, no water, and little oxygen and what the bloody hell are we going to do stark naked on the Forest People's home court?"

He squeezed her hand and smiled ruefully. "They aren't as smart as we are, or have you changed your mind about that?"

She shook her head. "Maybe someone's directing them. Maybe Sharada."

"Oh, in that case, what do we have to worry about?"

She laughed grimly at his irony. "Remember what happened last time we went to sleep? Akil, have you ever been betrayed, I mean really dumped and crapped on by someone you loved?"

"My ex, kind of. Somehow, after sixty years, I hadn't expected it to happen. But she didn't hurt me beyond that." Though that, he thought, had been enough. "Sharada couldn't have planned for you to be the one to come after her. It could have been anyone. That's not really her fault."

Marianne sighed. "She set the stage. Can you imagine what Olympia's going through? I asked you whether you'd been betrayed. Have you ever experienced *anything* like this before?"

Unfortunate memories came back to Akil, and he shuddered. "Once, as a kid," he said. "A girl I knew talked me into doing it with her, then she changed her mind at the last minute after, well, I was ready. I didn't know she had a microcam on us; she showed it to all her girlfriends. I had to tell my parents and change schools."

Marianne touched his arm. "That counts. Chaos, our ancestors wanted real sexual equality, they changed the genome to get it, and be careful what you wish for."

Akil yawned. Most men were less assertive than their ancestors and women were more so. Women were also taller, stronger, less emotionally dependent, better at math, and so on than the previous norm. Men were less angry and more verbal. Humanity had become a race more suited to communitarian sensibility than survival in the primeval forest; less frustration all the way around. Those decisions had been made over a century ago, and it seemed pointless to Akil to rehash them now. But Marianne needed to talk more than sleep. Whatever, he thought. "As I remember, it

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cut the homicide rate way down and made adolescence tolerable. Anyway, it's all statistical; any given person can still be anything people ever were."

"Yeah, in theory. But that makes us a different species, really. All that's left of sexual dimorphism is the different reproductive plumbing. But once upon a time there was a rich dimorphic culture with all kinds of literature that feels irrelevant now, written by people who plumbed a human nature that doesn't exist any more."

Akil smiled. "Most of that part of human nature was just culture, I thought."

Marianne shook her head. "Most modern people have no idea of what Ulysses *felt* when he returned and saw the suitors after Penelope. *Othello* is a complete mystery. I can relate to some of that, the way I feel about losing Sharada to, to *this*. But I'm a throwback, 'the last human woman' I called myself in college." She laughed. "And then I fall for another *woman* and then she does *this*. What a bloody damn mess!"

Akil could barely see her face in the dim light, but it seemed as if she were near tears. He reached and touched her hand, to reassure her. Time to change the subject, perhaps. "What college?"

"Queen's on New Brisbane, the space colony. My folks were from royalist refugee stock. Conservative in other areas, too. I don't know that they retro-engineered me, or anything like that, but it would have been in character. Why did she leave you?"

"Huh?"

"Your ex, Kit or something, what happened?"

"Her name was Kita. I'm boring, Marianne. Six decades of steady sensibility was enough for her." He smiled ruefully. "So if you want excitement . . ."

She shook her head and her eyes glistened. "Had enough of that, haven't I?"

She held tight on to his hand, then slipped through the hole in the trunk, slid herself beside him and artlessly pressed the rest of her bare body against his, trustingly, as a child might.

He put his arms around her and rocked her gently. It felt beautiful, but he thought this could have nothing to do with desire on her part, especially after her experience with the Forest People. So he simply held her until the tears dried and she slipped into a deep sleep.

Then he slipped away from her, adjusted the position of the staff to keep her from floating away, and left the hole. Far above, it must have been mid afternoon, but even Hazian daylight was more like diffuse moonlight this near the dead core of the interforest.

People, he thought, as much as they were intrigued by the new, also liked to conserve things, liked to keep them the way they used to be. Earth was turning into a museum; every species, every building preserved just the way it was in the era that people first became aware of it. If they could stop the drift of the continents, they would. Perhaps, as Marianne said, they didn't like to see the efforts of their forbearers turned into irrelevant dust. He understood Marianne's nostalgia for times gone by. But Marianne preferred women, which was certainly not an ancient human tradition, at least not in most cultures. Was this a contradiction?

Or was it that Sharada was simply the most passionate and assertive person within fifty light years and Marianne had simply had to have *that*, the best cave man available, plumbing being beside the point.

The engineers had done a good job, Akil thought, at least with him. His

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libido was distinctly laid back. But part of him wondered what it felt like, back then, to be so compelled, so motivated. Two steps forward, one back.

He wondered about the Forest People—perhaps Sharada and everyone else had it wrong. Perhaps they were not a nascent culture, but one that had been intelligent once upon a time and had simply given it up to stop torturing themselves. The Forest People certainly could be the products of advanced engineering; as far as fifty years of data collection by sensors and two months with observers in the field could tell, they never got sick, they never aged, they never fought, they never seemed bored or unhappy.

He shook his head and looked around him. The L1 point was an atmospheric Sargasso sea; debris from all over the central part of the forest would be brought here either by gravity from around it or by the warm winds from the planets. The low oxygen and absolute dryness might mean that some of this stuff was very, very old. Maybe, he told himself, old enough to preserve some record of evolution on these worlds.

He wandered away from Marianne's sleeping place a little, exploring branches, logs, trunks, and dried leaves that crumbled when he touched them. He found more spears, bones, skeletons, and whole mummified animals, both on the primitive (he assumed) ring plan of the Forest People and the double-spine of the pseudosimians. The winged critters tended toward the ring plan, but put on edge so the lower part of the ring worked as a breast bone. In the monkey-like things, the limb opposite the head had become long and tail-like, though it still retained a functional hand on its end.

He wondered again about Marianne's concern with the fossilized skeleton they'd found embedded in the tree. Everything he found was easily recognizable from his training, though it had to be very, very old. Yes, evolution seemed to have stopped dead in its tracks here and it seemed deliberate. But who had done it and why?

Then he found a rock. Probably a meteorite, from its rough, pocked surface. A tool. He broke off a dry branch from a nearby trunk and scraped it, then scraped it some more, putting an experimental point on the stick. It crumbled; he needed greener wood.

A large mass embedded in the trunk turned out to be volcanic glass, and a blow from the stone produced some obsidian shards that were sharp enough to use as a knife or a scraper. Akil laughed at himself. He'd progressed from precultural to Neolithic in an hour. Given enough time maybe he could build a starship.

He had nothing to carry his new found treasures in; for that he would need living leaves and root vines that had enough moisture to be tough and flexible. They would need to make an expedition back to the fringe of life, tap some roots for water, some food, and gather some material—if they could avoid the Forest People. With a stone in each hand, Akil made his way back to the hole in the trunk to wait for Marianne to wake.

Four eclipses later, they had lots of stringy root fibers for "thread," numerous very straight sticks, a dozen tough elephant ear leaves, several fruits that Marianne assured him were edible, and a wicker cage with a big ball of water—about a kilo, Akil figured—in it.

They'd also had a close encounter with Forest People and had spent an eclipse frozen in place in a tree hollow shared with some understanding balloon birds; they were larger versions of the ground-nesting "bubble birds,"

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and it had been disconcerting to watch the workings of their innards through the thin translucent skin stretched over their circular skeleton.

"Our own bones are starting to show, too," Marianne had joked.

Akil had smiled, but they both knew this could go on only so long. Searchers were out by now, he was sure. But they would be looking far, far below the null point.

After another four eclipses they each had a crude obsidian knife, a couple of dozen meters or so of crude twine, canteens made of hollow branches capped with elephant-ear leaf patches and sealed with megavine resin. They also had elephant-ear leaf capes, belly bags to carry their primitive treasures, and stout, springy staffs cut from tree foliage.

"The secret, I think, is not to stop," he told Marianne. "Just keep jumping out; we can move faster than the Forest People. Once we get outside the trees, our bodies should show up like infrared beacons to every sensor pointed at the general area. They should see us."

"If they're looking."

"Sensors have been looking at the outside of this place at centimeter resolution or better for over a standard year. It gets down to freezing and below at the forest edge. The sensors will see us. We'll just have to trust that they're programmed to notice us. Or some person looking at the data sees us."

Marianne nodded. "Okay. That's our best shot, I guess." She took a deep breath. "I suppose, if we get out of this, we'll look back and say, 'What an adventure!' I hope I remember how I feel right now if that time ever comes."

"It will," Akil said, trying to convince himself as much as Marianne.

They planned. It was approximately 120 kilometers out to the edge of the forest in the thinner air that surrounded the L1 point. Thin by Hazian standards, Akil reminded himself—it would still be thicker than Earth's at sea level. But with very little oxygen and cold. It would feel even colder than it was because dense air conducts heat more efficiently. The cold would be uncomfortable, but survivable. Assuming, he told himself, they didn't run out of fuel. It had been five days since they'd had a real meal with all the vitamins, minerals, and proteins that they needed. You can't live on sugar alone.

It grew dark outside. "Shadow eclipse. We should get another night's sleep."

"First shift," Akil volunteered.

"Akil, we haven't seen a Forest Person or anything else living down here for three standard days. I think the rest will do us more good than standing watch, or to put it the other way, being run down is a worse danger than getting found here by the Forest People. We're way down on energy stores; if food is sleep, sleep is food. Our bodies need the down time. Mine does, anyway."

That made sense to Akil, and they settled into the log together. Marianne cuddled up against him like a child. She looked into his eyes, and slowly, tentatively, began to caress him. He began to respond, and felt embarrassed.

"You're gay," he said.

"Shut up," she said. "That was a million years ago. Now I'm scared."

When they woke, he lay awake looking at her for several minutes, think-

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ing she was the most beautiful person he'd ever seen. Then he slid out of the hole and did his private things over a hollow that was "up" to the few microgees that remained here. Marianne was awake when he returned, and he automatically gave her a hand to help her out of the hole in the trunk. She held it a little tighter than usual.

"Ready?" he asked her after they'd tied their meager belongings around their waists.

"Yeah. No, wait."

She took her obsidian knife from her pack and scraped "M&A" in the dry surface of the dead, hollow trunk that had been their home for the last three standard days. "I don't have a camera, so that will have to do." She grinned, one of the few times Akil had seen her smile in the last few days.

Akil laughed. "You realize that tourists will be coming to see that for millions of years, or longer?" He put a hand on her arm. It was inevitable, he realized, that he would feel protective toward her; the ancient genetic programming that governed pair bonding, however muted, was asserting itself, and the ache in his soul where Kita had lived was becoming a memory.

If they got out of this, he knew the time would come for an effort of will to return to his chosen life and commitments. And Marianne would inevitably feel hurt by that, but, if he judged her right, she had enough understanding and willpower to take that in stride.

Then, he thought, remembering the skeleton around the spear, this could be all the life they might have together before an end filled with desperate efforts and pain. He imagined being transfixed by one of those spears and left alive against a vine like a still-living butterfly pinned to the backing of a collection box. He imagined being absorbed by it, woody fibers slowly covering his limbs, torso, head and finally his eyes and nose. He returned Marianne's embrace, needing the comfort as much as she did.

Their bodies urged them to dally, but they knew any further time lost lessened their already slim chances. After a moment, by some common unspoken consent, they released each other.

"Okay." Marianne said. "Let's do it. Out the way we came?"

Akil shook his head. "Aside from trying to avoid the place the Forest People gather, the forest is a little thinner along its north-south axis because gravity constrains it more. It will be a bit cooler that way too—better contrast for the optics."

"We stick together?"

Akil thought. Separate efforts would have the significant advantage of redundancy, but two going together would give them more eyes and hands and combine their complementary knowledge of the Hazian system. Where logic didn't give him a clear choice, his feelings did.

"Together. But, Marianne, if one of us gets caught, the other should press on. Our best shot is to let everyone else know where we are and get help."

She nodded, tight lipped. "Which way is north?"

"Good question. Thinking out loud, uh, where they took us when we were captured. . . ." He pointed. "That way, was on the east side I think. Haze's inner pole is that way, toward the glow. Those directions define a plane, so at right angles to that plane, this way . . ." He pointed through a relatively dense section of dead wood and vines, ". . . should be north. Once we get away from the core, we'll be able to judge by how even the light is."

"Good," Marianne said. "In twenty kilometers or so, we should start seeing patches of sky. It isn't as dense as it looks."

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"Thank providence for that. Okay, I'll take the first point." With that, Akil found handholds on "their" trunk, pulled his legs under him, and pushed off for the north.

Marianne followed. They usually jumped, but occasionally found a vine going the right direction and pulled themselves along it with a kind of pull-glide motion.

They set out as the next Shadow eclipse ended.

Eclipse followed eclipse until they had reached the first live roots that tapped the ancient debris for minerals. Another hour brought them to where house-sized microgravity versions of the "mushrooms" lived.

"Time to be more alert?" Akil spoke the first words they'd shared in several hours.

"Yeah. We should probably hole up and get some rest now. It might not be safe to do so later. Let's find some water, too. We can make the big push tomorrow."

After tapping a "mushroom" root, they found a hollow in a small dead branch, just big enough for both of them, and slithered in. Akil couldn't remember when he'd been so tired; he fell asleep almost instantly.

When they woke, they realized that they'd lost track of eclipses, and thus time. Marianne found some sweet fruit, and they made a meal of it as they waited for the next eclipse.

The eclipse twilight started to brighten without reaching complete darkness. "Haze eclipse," Akil said. "So, assuming we've been out more than three hours, we've either slept for nine hours or fifteen."

Marianne yawned. "If anyone ever finds us, they'll tell us what day it is."

Akil sighed. "Knowing would make me feel a little less helpless."

She wrapped herself around him. "How do you feel now?"

"Helpless. Look, Marianne, shouldn't we save our energy?"

"What energy? Probably. Shut up. Make me forget all this for a few minutes." She sealed his mouth with hers before he could say anything else. He found, to his surprise, that his need for this temporary oblivion was as great as hers. When they were done she wordlessly slipped out of their hideaway and went to the other side of the tree.

After a moment of contemplation, he came out as well, grabbing their belly bags on the way. Wondering how far they'd come, he broke off a twig, let it go and counted to ten; it drifted about a meter in that time.

"Acceleration is up to a couple of centimeters per second; that's about sixty kilometers above the center on the last isogee map I saw."

"That high? I think we'll make it, then. I feel like, like it's worth trying. I didn't when I woke up. Thanks." She shrugged into her cape, and tied her pack around her waist. "I'm ready."

Upward. They climbed more than jumped now, as the growth became more dense. Akil's movements became automatic; grab, pull, coast, grab, and pull. Marianne took the lead; she knew the wildlife. She was also in better shape and he had to force himself to a faster pace to keep up. Dry twigs and thorns scraped him and he was occasionally thankful for the loin pouches they'd made.

The canopy went by fast enough that even he noticed gradual changes in the surrounding ecology. Large branches of the main trunks that ran between the worlds oriented to the local vertical as if they were trees them-

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selves. There were splashes of color among the gray and black of the vegetation. Mugginess and humidity returned. Breath was no longer a problem for Akil. But fatigue from lack of normal nourishment and water were now taking their toll.

"Hush!" Marianne said suddenly.

Akil grabbed a branch, held still and looked around for Forest People.

"Flying elephants. Right in front of us," she added.

His perception of the shapeless boles on a tree ahead morphed as if by magic. He nodded.

"Maybe we can ride them," Marianne suggested.

She approached slowly, then leaped at one, grabbing it on the back. It jumped in panic and flailed its ears, turning ponderous elephantine cartwheels in the air. With relatively little effort, she managed to wrap her legs around its neck, and grabbing the "stems" of its elephant ears as if they were the handlebars on a bike, steered it on an erratic path to the other side of the clearing and back.

"Woof—I hope this gets easier. Well, what are you waiting for? Grab one!"

Akil did, imitating what Marianne had done. He managed to steer it about as well as she did, and followed her on the way up. They covered about twice their usual distance before the next Haze eclipse, but the effort of steering left them exhausted and in the growing dimness, they almost ran into a huge water ball, maybe ten meters across, floating in a gentle updraft like a huge soap bubble.

"A bath!" Marianne squealed. In unspoken consent, they let go of the difficult flying elephants, which fled, as quickly as they did anything, back toward the core. Marianne handed her cape and pouch to Akil, took a breath, and eased herself into the mass of water. It quivered and wobbled alarmingly, but didn't quite break apart.

Akil searched the gloom for Forest People and saw none. Now that the flying elephants were gone, he realized that in addition to transportation, their clinging to the large creatures had probably hidden them from the Forest People.

But first things first. His body was an itching stinging mess of scratches and dust and he felt attracted to the water ball as if it had the gravity of a Jovian planet. He tied their pouches and capes to a convenient branch and slid his body into the shaking mass. It was like being swallowed by a live thing; the surface tension drew him inside the cool liquid. While not uncomfortable it was easily several kelvins below the temperature of the ambient air.

He took a deep breath, and being very careful not to disrupt the drop, eased himself in the rest of the way. He tried to peer through the water ball, but everything was bizarrely distorted as the surface of the water undulated. He rubbed his body with his hands everywhere he could reach, longing for a sponge or a wash cloth. Marianne swam over and ran her hands over his back. He returned the favor. They stuck their heads out for air together.

"I could stay in here all day," she said, "if I weren't so hungry. By the way, did you see the air fish? They've gone back to their ancestral habitat!"

He looked into the wobbling globe of water and after a few seconds found one of the microgravity flyers swimming as if it had been born to it. A small rain of amber bubbles trailed it.

"Marianne, it's spawning. Laying eggs. That train of bubbles."

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"Wow! Nice eye, Akil. I'm sure that's what it's doing. These water balls must be an important part of the ecology up here. This place warrants a lifetime of study."

He spotted another water ball, and a third. There must, he thought, be a storm above. The water stung his eyes a little and tasted vaguely sulfurous. The warm, saturated air from the eruption must have reached the L1 point. There must be a huge cloud over the forest, he realized. He and Marianne would not be seen unless they could get above it somehow.

They stayed in the water ball through totality. As light returned, they tried to swim out of the water ball, but emerging turned out to be less easy than anticipated. Simply rising out of its top wouldn't work—it drew them back in. Finally, Marianne pushed Akil out and he pulled her out in turn. They shook themselves dry as well as they could, found their things and resumed climbing.

"I think the eruption's triggered a big storm." He shivered; in the dense Hazian air, a slight breeze signaled a major blow. "Feel the wind?"

"Yes. A little chilly."

"You don't usually lose much temperature with altitude here, but a storm is a different matter. Cold air tends to spill down on the outside of the forest; that's why it's more or less comfortable at the base."

"What do we do—climb up into the cold and freeze until it clears up? Normally we'd survive, but we're run down—not much energy."

An air snake rippled its three meter body by them, turning its jaws aside in a quick snap at something too small for Akil to see.

"It would be nice to be able to fly ourselves," he remarked.

Marianne let go of her vine and made vigorous motions, as if she were trying to tread water. She was able to hold herself aloft, even rise a little, but soon grabbed the vine in exhaustion.

"I'd need some kind of real wings," she said.

Akil thought of trying to sew elephant-ear leaves into a crude wing, with sticks to stiffen them, but a look at his already-fraying cape told him they wouldn't have the kind of strength to hold a seam. "Maybe we can make some, but not out of what's around here."

"Yeah, it'll get a little cooler and dryer in the canopy top with some stiffer flora."

They plunged on up into the murk. Two, three eclipses went by. The clearings in the forest got larger, bubbles of empty space for them to jump through. It was a great relief, each jump giving them a minute or so of total relaxation.

He shut his eyes for twenty seconds.

"Akil!" Marianne yelled.

He opened his eyes just meters in front of a branch with a Forest Person on it who was reaching for him with its hands. Instinctively, he swung his staff at it. It grabbed the staff and pulled.

But Akil wasn't heading exactly for the Forest Person, and its pull swung him down toward the branch. Akil let go of the staff and jumped with everything he had left as his feet landed on the branch. He felt the rough sticky surface of the Forest Person's hand scrape his foot as he left the branch, but it couldn't hold him.

"Akil, run! I'll be all right, just run!"

Free, he looked around, trying to find Marianne and figuring out where he was going to land.

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She was nowhere to be seen. He called her name and heard nothing but a rustle of leaves. The clearing was inundated with Forest People, swarming over the foliage like so many ants, heading toward him.

His words had been: "Our best chance is to press on alone," or something to that effect. Maybe, just maybe, she had done that. He jumped in the only direction he couldn't see Forest People, in through the forest, brushing leaves and vines but somehow avoiding being snagged. He grabbed a tree and had a moment of confusion as to which way was up or down. But the moment passed and it was clear to him. He seized a vine and yanked himself upward.

The forest here was dark gray on black and he couldn't see much in front of or behind him. But he could hear them, rustle, rustle, rustle. Oh, he could hear them.

Then, suddenly, the eclipse passed and he was through the canopy and into a clearing above a magnificent cloudscape. Only a few branches of the tree he was on jutted out above him and similar tops stuck out of the mass here and there. There was wind here, and it even smelled cold.

He looked down; he couldn't see any Forest People for the moment. He climbed.

He reached a place where the trunk split into three branches and formed a kind of cup, almost three meters across, with a flat patch of soil. Marianne would go wild, he thought; a cloud island that likely had a dozen unique species, though he wouldn't recognize them.

But it did have one he did recognize; a grove of beetle-plant of the sort that they'd made their staffs from. He could use another one after surrendering his last to the Forest Person. He broke a branch off and was about to tear the bottom leaf off when he noted that moving it moved all the other leaves up the staff as well; they overlapped like scales.

Or feathers, he realized.

He waved it experimentally; if he held a leaf as well as the staff, he felt a lot of resistance one way, where the overlap of the leaf he held kept the next from trailing in the wind and so on down the line. In the other direction, the overlap went the wrong way and the leaves trailed freely.

A Forest Person appeared over the edge of the cup and scurried toward him.

He snapped off another beetle-plant staff near its roots and jumped for the sky. The cup filled with Forest People, waving their arms at him and making grasping motions with their hands. Some jumped and began swimming toward him.

It took him a few tries to figure out how to hold the beetle plant just right, to brace the severed stump in his armpit, grab the staff with his thumb, and use his fingers to stiffen the second leaf. He was falling again by the time he made his first coordinated flap, but when he did, it sent him upward. So he did it again. The motion was more a kind of swimming or rowing than flying, but it did propel him upward. He rapidly outdistanced the air-swimming Forest People. A lone tree projecting through the clouds to his right was strangely bent as if it were missing some of its crown. The remaining portion pointed, more or less, a third of a right circle away from him. He fixed it in his memory and settled into a stroke, rest, stroke pattern that he thought he could maintain for a while. The deck was far above him, kilometers perhaps, but there was nothing to do but keep trying.

The wind changed direction; up until now all he'd felt was the wind of his

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passage, but now a warm gust was coming from below him, gently but persistently. Was he dropping? No, the sky above seemed to be getting lighter. An updraft. Even though the clouds were his goal, he looked at them with apprehension. Hazian storms did not have the violence and power of high gravity planet storms, but there were still tremendous amounts of total energy involved.

He blew by a water ball on his left; a huge spherical droplet several times the volume of the one he and Marianne had bathed in. Even in this incredible scene, the thought of her burned in his mind. He belonged with her, he realized. How had that happened?

Suddenly, it was completely white around him. Wind changed direction and changed again, his mass acting as a kind of accelerometer; the longer it took him to reach terminal velocity in a particular air mass, the faster the wind. In the clouds, in the low gravity, it was hard to tell up from down, and he had to stop occasionally and toss one of his stones to see which way it fell relative to him.

Shadow eclipse robbed him of any light. He was cold, wet, dark, and struggling to stay vertical for minutes. Then a white twilight faded in again.

Something smashed him in the back and almost caused him to lose his wings. He twisted around to look and saw a ball of ice that must have been over a meter across drifting down below him. He looked up just in time to see another one float grandiosely by him on its way down. He stroked his wings to build up some velocity in the air mass and give him some maneuverability, and did have to dodge a couple of them. His, cape, in tatters, fell off.

Then, so suddenly it made his eyes hurt, he was in Oshatsh light surrounded by billowing pillars of gleaming white clouds. Up and up he went, like being in an elevator that did not stop. His lungs burned; oxygen at this altitude must be so low, he thought ruefully, that he couldn't remember how low it should be.

But as he scudded up out of the cloud forest the scene below made him forget his fatigue. Huge worlds filled his sky on either side of him, while the cloudscape seemed fantastically sculpted. He could trace the Hazian jet stream by wind-shredded clouds as it spiraled down south of the interforest, then back again on the other side, as geometry and Coriolis force made their topological compromises. There were holes, vast slashes in the cloud formation that revealed the interforest far, far below.

Somewhere, far out to the east and west, were satellites that should be imaging him now, a black, hot spot against the cold cloud tops. He tried to hold his wings behind him, so he looked less like some errant item of Hazian fauna.

"I'm here, damn it, I'm here," he muttered to himself. "See me!"

Exhaustion caught up with him and he trembled with cold. He had to get back down into the warm fast. The updraft that had been his salvation was now his enemy. With aching arms, he rowed himself sideways until he sensed the chill of a downdraft, pointed his head at the clouds and flew down, resting several seconds between each stroke. Eclipses came and went.

He was far past exhaustion when he finally broke through the clouds amidst a sunlit shower of glistening wobbling raindrops as large as himself scattered every few hundred yards or so. He spotted the tall tree with the

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bent crown a few kilometers down and away. He rested, gliding toward it, descending, descending . . .

He got the scare of his life when he woke up over it and realized he'd fallen asleep while gliding and shivered at the thought of the disaster that could have caused. He shook his head hard to clear it and looked a third of a circle left from the slant. The tallest tree that way must be the one he'd climbed. With incredible good luck, Marianne, if free, should be nearby.

He missed her terribly. How, he wondered, could you get so used to a person in only a few days? But those few days seemed like an eternity. His universe of instant communications, on-demand equipment, and the support of unlimited reasoning power seemed to have evaporated like a dream. His reality now was the forest and survival.

He had to get down into the warm, find some fruit, find a hole, and see if he could rest long enough to recharge his batteries. He was almost to the crown when he thought of his rescuers. How would they find *him?* He couldn't rest yet; he had to leave some kind of sign or message. The letter A, he thought, for his name. He arranged some beetle plants in the form of an A about three meters by three meters, nearly filling the treetop island. Then, for good measure, he carved an A into one of the branches and under it carved an arrow pointed down.

Then he started climbing down. Despite the way his senses protested, he found he made the best progress by ignoring the minuscule gravity altogether and pulling himself along head down. Oh to be warm again!

He was well into the canopy by the time he recognized some of Marianne's fruits. He husked and wolfed down three of them on the spot, looking up and around for Forest People every moment his eyes weren't needed to manage his hands. As a child, he'd always thought it was amusing the way a squirrel's head would jerk up and glance around every now and then while eating. Now, he understood. He found a half dozen more fruits and stuffed them in his pouch.

Now for a place to sleep. He found no holes on this trunk, so he hurriedly carved an A and an arrow on the trunk, and jumped in the direction of the arrow. Still no Forest People.

A half dozen more such jumps gave him a ten-meter diameter trunk with a hole full of butterball birds, which he unsentimentally evicted. Once in, he found a warm nest covered with straw. He darted out and cut some beetle plant staffs which he used to bar the entrance of what was now his nest by right of conquest. Shadow Eclipse came, and he slept.

It was pitch dark when he woke again—Shadow eclipse plus clouds, he thought, leaving not a glimmer of light. With each passing hour the likelihood that people looking at the satellite data would have seen him above the clouds and followed him into the forest was getting less and less, and with it any chance that they would be looking for the women here near the L1 point as opposed to around the more usual Forest People haunts.

If he could only find Marianne again. He shut his eyes and tried to get some more rest

"Akee?"

His eyes shot open. Who was out there? Marianne?

"Akee?"

Something bumped him in the back. With a flick of his hand, he levitated himself and looked down. A tiny butterball bird, its eyes shut, but otherwise looking like a miniature of the adults, was calling. A quick investigation re-

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vealed that it had just hatched, and, under the straw "floor" of his nest, lay some broken eggshell and two as-yet intact eggs.

He couldn't resist petting the top of its furry little head with the end of his little finger. "Sorry, kid. I can't take time to be a father just now. Maybe if I get out of here, yours will come back."

"Akee?"

"Yeah, whatever." Akil pulled the beetle-plant staffs from the hole, stuck his head out to see if the coast was clear, pulled the rest of himself out and got set to jump. As he crouched, he happened to look down at the trunk. There, very clearly, was carved the letter "M" and an arrow.

Small world, he thought. He jumped in the direction of the arrow and looked for another "M ➜."

He lined that one up with the trunk with the butterball-bird nest and jumped for the next trunk. Another "M." By the next eclipse, he'd found another empty nest with an "M" over it, and a crude note: "Stay here."

He stayed through the Haze eclipse and through the next Shadow eclipse. It was the longest wait in his life, but just before the umbra of Haze reached the center of Shadow again, she came in the hole, saw him, and threw herself and a leaf bag of fruit into the nest and into his arms.

Unable to think of anything else, he stated the obvious. "You got away."

"I wasn't that far behind you; I saw you fly away. Then I went aloft each period between eclipses scanning the sky for you. I was going to give it a couple more sunny periods, then try it myself. Do you think they saw you?"

"How long?"

"Seven eclipses.

"Chaos, over a day. I'm afraid they didn't, then. I'll be in their data, but what person or machine would be looking for a man-sized infrared source there?"

"Should we try to fly back?"

"All the way to Haze?" Akil could see the planet from the opening of their nest. "The eruption's still going; see the orange in the clouds? Less than half that distance down to Shadow. There's a base there."

He was silent for a while. "And there's still Olympia."

Her lips tightened. "I need to have my head examined. Yeah, there's still Olympia. And Sharada, she could be captured as well, in spite of her relationship with the Forest People. Akil, I really, really don't want to go through that again. But then I think of them 'communicating' with Olympia. So I guess I've got to risk it."

"Maybe not. Could we find that place again," Akil asked, "in any reasonable time?"

"If we can find our trunk near the center . . . oh!"

"Right. Down in and out again, that's two hundred kilometers of dodging Forest People—we'd be able to reach the Shadow base and fly back on an air scooter with reinforcements in less time than that would take."

"Okay," she agreed, almost sounding relieved. "We'll make some wings and fly for the Shadow base. First, I need some rest." She lay on the straw in their nest.

He lay beside her, and she embraced him.

"Oh, is it good to have you again!" Her hands started to caress him, but to no avail this time.

He managed a soft chuckle. "Too tired, Marianne, and probably lacking several key nutrients. I really do need sleep."

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"Mmm, sure. Good night, then."

He dreamed about Marianne that night. They were at some sort of party and she came toward him from across the room and interrupted his conversation about the ammonia volcanoes of Shipapu and asked him why he was naked; he hadn't realized that he was naked until then, and, embarrassed, excused himself from the conversation and tried to flee the room, but Marianne, as naked as he was, caught him and threw him down on the floor and started to make love.

"People will see," he protested, "they will tear us apart."

But no one did. A colleague ignored what was happening to ask him a question about viscosity in low gravity as she pressed her breasts against him and bit his shoulder. He answered that it was unaffected, and then he wanted her so badly he could scream. He tried to tell her that he wanted her somehow in *him*. But she guided him into her with one hand, caressed his body with another, held his arms helplessly down with two others, and pressed her soft furry chest against his.

As in most such dreams, he began to wake before reaching climax. But as he began thinking, the dream didn't go away and he realized that the fur wasn't right and Marianne had too many arms. Terrified, he tried to force himself awake, to force himself to breath in and out, to move *anything*.

He came out of it, opened his eyes and saw the single huge central eye of a Forest Person.

He convulsed and screamed, then screamed again as whatever was in the Forest Person's analog of a vagina bit into the most sensitive part of his anatomy. His arms were helpless and he arched his back in a spasm of agony.

He fainted.

When he regained consciousness, he was being bundled out of the hole in the tree—the same one; he caught a glimpse of the carved "M" and the "Stay here." Every motion brought pain to his nether regions, with the small consolation that this showed his nether regions were still present. "Marianne?" he called.

No answer. He got dizzy again.

When he woke, it was warmer. The foliage seemed to be flying by as if the Forest People were in a hurry. He was being held tightly, tighter than before, if he judged it correctly. They weren't letting him turn his head. Learning? Had the Forest People followed Marianne's carvings right to their nest?

Time to see if Marianne was with them. "Marianne?" He tried to shout, but it came out more like a hoarse croak, as if his throat had dried out completely. He'd probably fainted with his mouth open. He shut his mouth.

"Akil, behind . . . you."

"Are you all right?"

"What do you think? Are you all right? Get me out of here," she yelled, "someone please get me out of here!" Then she started sobbing.

What could he do? Held by a dozen arms and weak as a kitten, there was nothing he could do. What could he say? What could he do for himself? Wall it off, maybe. Stick it in a mental compartment and think about everything else as if his experience didn't affect anything. Concentrate on other things; deal with it by not dealing with it. Psychological first aid.

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"Marianne, try to set it aside in some kind of mental compartment. Deal with it later. We need your brain, your knowledge; we can't fight our way out of this one. Can you do that? Try?"

There was a minute of silence. Then, "Yeah, I'll try. In a minute; I have to empty the compartment first." She let out another bloodcurdling scream. Then she said in a voice that sounded more detached, "That felt good. I may need a few more."

"I don't blame you," he said.

"Thanks. Well, I guess we solved our problem of finding the Forest People's clearing. I'm seeing more striped air fish; they like heat of the east and west poles of the interforest. They're a meter across and look something like a flounder or a sole, with black stripes head to tail. And I think we're following the East main; see the longitudinal depression? We think it's a merger of two trees. There are only two main trunks that look like that and one of them is far south."

"It seems a little warmer and it's brighter after Shadow eclipse," Akil added, straining to try to turn his head back in the grip of his captor to throw his voice behind him. "I think we're on the East side of the interforest."

"Can you piss, Akil. I can't."

"Why?"

"Molecules for our rescuers to track, wherever they are."

He tried. Nothing. He couldn't remember when he'd last had a drink of water. But maybe he could spit. He really had to work at it, but finally managed to send a small mucous ball flying out toward the trees.

"Try spitting," he said.

"Good idea."

Akil felt very tired, and let himself doze off again, taking care to shut his mouth. He awoke in Haze eclipse. He let Marianne know he was still alive and then tried to relax to watch the forest. He wondered about its quiet; Earth forests could be cacophonous, but here, calls were few, clear and individual. The air had a tinge of sulfur; was the eruption still in progress, he wondered, or did the smell just hang around for a long time in the dense atmosphere?

"Oh no!" screamed Marianne. "Akil, to your left!"

He almost missed it, and wished he had. It was Sharada, flat against a huge elephant-ear leaf vine. She was pale white. A shaft stuck out from a wound just below her sternum. Shiny, sticky fluids from the vine had already started to spread over her legs, torso, and the back of her head. There was a whiff of sweetness as they passed.

But she was alive; still able to turn her head as they passed her.

"Don't worry; Marianne. It's okay. It's how the forest does things. Accept it." She smiled, then turned away to complete what was apparently the business of dying a slow, grisly death.

Marianne screamed "Help!" at a note so high it punished Akil's ears. He joined in, but by some unspoken mutual consent, they gave up after three screams. Neither the forest, the Forest People, nor anything unseen appeared to notice.

Then they were back in the Forest People's clearing, held against tree trunks stripped of even the meager belongings they had managed to make in their few standard days of freedom, at the mercy of something they could not comprehend.

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The Forest People didn't wait long. A Forest Person was in Akil's face, stroking him, pressing its cloacal cavity against his recently abused penis. "Get away from me," he said, without any hope of being understood. "Get away from me."

"Akil," Marianne said, "the spears."

Some nearby Forest People were holding them. Was that the deal, he wondered. Give them a few inches of hard flesh or get skewered like Sharada Fina? It was no use trying to explain that human anatomy didn't work that way. Should he close his eyes and try to forget what was happening and imagine something? Go back to his dream. Could he do that to save his life?

No, he would not. But he could shut his heart down; if the spear didn't do it, he would not lie there pinned like some insect, watching Marianne get raped. As a young boy, he had once pierced a fly with a pin and watched it struggle for ten minutes. He had been ashamed of himself later. Was he up against some being as incomprehensible to him as he must have been to the fly?

He had never believed in any kind of Galactic oversight. Here and there people had found nodes of what they called "the galactic library," but other works of ancient sentients were spread very thin, and there was no reproducible evidence of the slightest interference in the development and occasional demise of any intelligent beings. But his own oncoming fate had all the markings of the humor of some sadistic, omnipotent judge right out of the god mythologies of many cultures.

"Akil . . ." Marianne's voice was soft.

"I think we're done for. Don't worry about losing control. No one will know how we die."

"I'll know. You'll know. But that wasn't what I want to talk about. Over to your right. I think I see some field kits. The yellow one is Sharada's, the one you brought. It might still have her com patch in it."

He looked quickly. "Got you." Was there any way to get it?

The Forest Person in front of him suddenly gave up and turned its attention to Marianne. Akil waited for the spear.

"*Get the Bloody Hell Away from Me!!!*" Marianne screamed as the Forest Person came at her to do its thing. She wrenched her body this way and that, and even in the grip of four of them managed to resist it.

She would soon wear out, he knew, but he was full of admiration for her struggle.

A pale lithe figure drifted in, seemingly from nowhere, and touched the struggling Forest Person. It noticed her and acted confused. Olympia. She stroked the Forest Person and, as it turned, presented herself to it.

"Olympia," Marianne said in a hushed voice. "Oh, no. Don't. Not that. Turn it back to me. I won't resist anymore. You don't have to do that."

"I don't mind," Olympia said, letting the Forest Person embrace her. "It doesn't hurt that much. Sharada says they're just exchanging encoded proteins with us. It's not any worse than the medical robots. You just have to get used to it." The girl shivered a little. "I'm still working on the 'getting used to it' part, but I think I can tell them to leave you alone. I think 'please no' real hard, and that puts something in my blood that they understand." She floated clear of the Forest Person, which scrambled purposefully away to somewhere in the gloom. There was a bright drop of red clinging to her thigh. She brushed it away.

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"Olympia," Akil said, hardly believing what he was seeing, "Olympia, do they know we're aliens?"

"Uh, not them. But the Caretaker does. Sharada says the Forest People are like the eyes and arms of the forest."

"The forest? The Caretaker? Is the forest conscious?" Marianne asked. "Can we talk to it?"

She shook her head. "We're too fast. It thinks too slowly—very deep, very parallel, but slow."

"So . . ." Akil said, "the Forest People aren't smart enough themselves to understand us, and the forest itself is too big and slow?"

"Something like that. Sharada was trying to fix that, and it's caught on, she says."

"Olympia," Marianne said. "I think something's gone very wrong. Can you help us get away?"

She looked around. "I don't think so. As long as I don't try to get away, they let me float around and stuff. It took a couple days for them to trust me that much."

"Do you," Marianne said quietly, "know what happened to Sharada?"

"She said that a marvelous thing was going to happen, a transformation. That's the whole reason we ran away like that, so she could do this thing and I could witness the results. She went that way—" Olympia pointed with a free hand back along the double main east trunk "—with the yellow-eared group."

Marianne turned her head to Akil and shook it. The message was clear to him; say nothing about what they'd seen. Not yet. But he did have something to say about something else.

"Olympia, do you recognize Sharada's backpack?"

"The yellow one. She didn't want them here, but the Forest People brought them."

"I put Sharada's com patch in it before we left."

"Oh!"

"Olympia?" Akil's voice was anything but steady. "Can you get it, put it on and call for help?"

"I don't think Sharada would like that."

Marianne said, "Olympia, we're very tired and we haven't had any real food or much water for the last three days. I've known Sharada for a very long time, and she wouldn't want us to die like this. I'm sure she won't object. There's nothing anyone can do to prevent her from doing what she wants now."

Olympia thought about it and looked around at the Forest People, who didn't seem to be paying any attention to her. She pushed herself toward the backpack.

Nothing moved to stop her.

She rummaged, then stuck both hands in. When she withdrew them, she was holding a nutrient pill container and a canteen. She pushed herself back to Akil, popped a pill in his mouth and gave him a squirt of water. "They say you shouldn't have too much all at once," she said.

The com patch was on her wrist. There was no way for Akil to tell if it was activated.

Olympia looked at it intently. "I think it's working. They've got a record-and-transmit only protocol for when Forest People are around."

"Hold it next to my mouth," he whispered.

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She looked around, then did as he asked.

"Stavros, this is Mateo. Please forget the damn protocols and get an autodoc in here now. Let us know you hear us, please. This is an emergency; Sharada's been badly wounded and she's shutting down."

"Mateo, Stavros. I'm breaking protocol, but to hell with it. Cristos!"

"What?

"Do you know what you guys look like?"

"Worse for wear I'd imagine."

"You're both stringy thin, dirty as hell, and Akil, you look like you've managed to turn brown. I can imagine what you've been through. We've been copying all of this, and the chiefs don't know what to make of it. I'm afraid Sharada's welfare isn't high on the priority list. We're evacuating the planet."

"Huh?"

"Look, my advice is to get out of there and head outward if you can. I've got a fix and if I can get you without a major Forest People incident, I will. Forget about Sharada—if she shuts down she shuts down. Stavros out."

"I'd better give Marianne some pills and water, too," Olympia said.

Akil nodded and she went over to Marianne. He couldn't hear what they said to each other, but he could see the tears in Marianne's eyes.

Very gently, Olympia tried to pry the hand of one of Marianne's captors off her wrist, but the captor held firm.

"They learn," Akil said. "They knew about our previous escape."

"You got away?" Olympia asked, in apparent wonderment. "Why didn't you run home?"

"We came for Sharada and you," Akil answered. "We didn't give up soon enough."

"Gee, I'm sorry. I don't think I'm in any real danger. But Sharada's going to be really upset."

"I don't think so." Marianne said.

"That is true, Marianne. I am not upset."

Three heads turned toward the new voice. Sharada pulled herself into the clearing on a vine from the opposite side of the clearing. She seemed very subdued.

"Dr. Fina?" Akil asked, in wonderment. She looked no worse for wear and there was no evident wound below her chest but something was different.

"The new me, Hazian version."

"Oh! You're . . . you're a hermaphrodite," Marianne said.

"The forest came up with something that can transcribe DNA to what Hazians use. My new body is made from Hazian cells and has a compatible interface. Because of the low gravity, the interface has to be protected, internal. The resemblance to anything human was a coincidence, but a useful one. This is too important for squeamishness. I will demonstrate."

Sharada touched and stroked the nearest Forest Person. It turned to face her and simultaneously held and stroked her. Their bodies hid the rest of what happened, but after some gentle pelvic thrusts, Sharada sighed and turned back to them.

"I have just passed some instructions that my brain has encoded in the Hazian equivalent of DNA, what we call Hazian transfer genes, or HTG."

She repeated the performance with another Forest Person, while the first one proceeded to communicate with yet another. In a few moments Akil and Marianne were released.

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"Olympia, that is my com patch." She reached for it. Olympia let her take it, looking as confused and terrified as Akil had ever seen a person look.

"You were dying," Marianne said.

"My old body served as the template and the process of learning it is necessarily destructive. The Caretaker demonstrated my change with one of the Forest People. A damaged one lay down on the trunk there, they put a spear through it to hold it there, and soon a new one with the same markings and no scars floated out of their factory—a special vine half a kilometer further toward center. The new body communicated with the old one; there's some final calibration that needs to be done. After that, the old one was absorbed. That is how we dispose of bodies around here. The vines need the minerals, calcium and so on. The example was clear."

Marianne's face looked white. "You let them run a spear through you."

"Yes, but by then they were sending me simple chemical messages; a few minutes after a transfer, I would know something I hadn't known before, generally as an image. That convinced me. The transformation was my best chance to make the contact breakthrough before I was gently shoved aside by the expedition bureaucracy and their robots. Unfortunately, the calibration process was not complete when my old body expired. I have probably sacrificed some of myself, but I do not know what, so I do not feel any loss. I have the memory of getting speared, for instance. It was like being hit hard in the stomach at first. The sharp pain came later, but was tolerable."

Next time? Akil felt like a cold wind had just blown through the forest. Olympia? Marianne? Him? What Sharada had lost was her common sense, judgment, whatever tells you not to go making monsters out of people. Steady, he told himself. "How," he asked, "do you know you're you?"

"I feel like me. All the memories feel familiar. How do you know you are you when you wake up in the morning?" She spoke into her com patch. "Hello everyone, this is Sharada, everything is okay. I have news. The Forest People are not the intelligence here; the Caretaker is; the Caretaker is the mind that inhabits the network of vines that makes up most of the interforest. The Hazians left it to keep their planets from changing too much while they visit a distant galaxy—a round trip journey of about 1.2 billion standard years. The Caretaker thinks slowly by our standards, but it knows what we are and wants to preserve the contact for its masters as long as this can be done without significant change to the twin worlds.

"The Forest People are its automatons; their behavior is programmed chemically. They do not have a higher form of consciousness because if they did, they would be slaves and that would be cruel. They cull mutations identified by the Caretaker, discourage cross-forest traffic, distribute baseline HTG to preserve the existing ecologies so that the Hazians can come home again. Every species is preserved, in approximately the same numbers, doing the same things. Over.

The com patch on Sharada's wrist came alive. "Stavros here. Good to hear from you, Sharada. I won't say there's not going to be hell to pay when you get back to the star base, but it's really good to see everyone okay."

"Stavros," Sharada said. "I am not coming back. My body chemistry is now Hazian. My human consciousness is the same, but there is much more. I will do a full report as soon as I get the time, but I must remain here and I am content."

"Hazian?" Stavros asked.

"Biochemically Hazian with the anatomical change that you see."

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That got about ten seconds of silence from Stavros. Finally, he said, "Uh, roger. Look, this is all a bit much for people to digest right now. They have to talk about the implications and such, and get back to Richards at the star base before they do anything. It looks like things are stable there for the time being. We've got a good fix. Someone should be up to you in a couple of hours. From what you say, we don't need to worry about technology transfer, so sky cycles shouldn't be a problem. Talk to you later, Stavros over."

Akil didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Hurry, he wanted to yell. But that might just trigger everything.

Sharada nodded. "I want Uma to talk to Olympia before she talks to me. Otherwise, I look forward to seeing you. Sharada out." She turned to Marianne. "Mari, it is time for us to go have a talk."

Every muscle in Akil's body went tense.

"I'm not so sure about that," Marianne said.

"The Caretaker is." Sharada turned and quickly and unabashedly coupled with a Forest Person. Each time she did it, Akil became a little more inured to the function, and this time was able to watch the process with some clinical detachment.

"Maybe in a few days," Marianne replied, as evenly as she could. "This is going to take some getting used to."

"I am very sorry," Sharada said, softly. "But we do not really have a few days. From what Stavros said, it sounds like everyone will be off Haze and Shadow in hours. So please come now? It will be much better for Hazian-human contact if you do not fight it."

As if on cue, some Forest People moved around Marianne and between Akil and Olympia and the other two. Chemical communication was, apparently, very specific once you had the code.

Marianne shuddered, then took a deep breath and looked into Akil's eyes from behind the limbs of a Forest Person.

"Akil. Akil, you've got to take care of Olympia, now. Okay. Just take care of her and *tell* Sharada you two will stay and wait for me? Understand? Just *tell* her that."

Sharada smiled for the first time; it looked artificial. "Marianne is right. There is really nothing to worry about. She will be back as good as new."

A fully human being, he realized, would have caught on. But the new Sharada was missing something, acting too naïvely. Marianne's ironic tone and body language had meant that they were to do exactly the opposite of what she said. As soon as she was out of sight with the new Sharada, he and Olympia were to run like hell.

Marianne, Akil figured, was going to sacrifice herself to give him and Olympia a chance. If only Stavros had caught on that something was terribly wrong. The rescuers had to be near, Akil thought. Maybe he could delay things until they arrived.

"Marianne," he reached for her, clumsily, hanging onto his vine. Forest People blocked him easily. "Sharada, please, just a minute."

Sharada smiled and brought Marianne over to him. Her eyes warned him against saying anything. He didn't. He just pulled her into his arms and they clung to each other until Sharada said, "Come on, Akil. I knew her before you did. Marianne, let us go now." The hands of Forest People slid onto Marianne's arms and drew her away. There were tears in her eyes. "Remember me," she whispered.

"Uh, Sharada," Akil said, trying for another stall, but a potentially useful

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one. "Could we have the com patch while you two are having your talk. We've got a lot of catching up to do. I haven't heard much about the eruption and Uma will want to talk to Olympia and, oh, all sorts of things."

Sharada smiled. "Of course. We have to promote good relations as much as possible." She took it off and handed it to him, then led Marianne off.

Marianne looked back once and gave him a brave thumbs up. Then they were gone.

When he figured they were out of earshot, Akil turned to Olympia and put the com patch on her. "Sharada is not human any more, at least not fully. Do you understand?"

Olympia nodded, trembling.

"I think the Caretaker wants us here as backup specimens, in case it can't transform Marianne correctly either. Or it wants even more Hazian-human hybrids. Are you listening in, Stavros?"

"We copy. We're fifty kilometers out and they're still arguing about sending robots in. What if the Caretaker is hostile and can retroengineer the technology? Similar nonsense. I'm going to do it anyway. Fan cycles with full A.I. enabled. They'll home on your com patch and you can ride them out. One hour, copy?"

"Roger. Thanks." Finally! He looked at the dense growth surrounding the clearing. An hour—half that if they could meet him halfway.

"Don't be late. They've pulled the planetside bases, and might leave the system altogether. Some of them feel this puts all of humanity in jeopardy—we don't know what the Caretaker can do or will want to do. So, last call."

"Roger. Uh, let Uma know her daughter will call her as soon as she's free. Akil out."

"Copy. Stavros out."

Haze eclipse was nearing maximum; they should run at first light. "Olympia, you're going to have to climb like the wind. Jump, hard wherever you can. With your Earth muscles, you can move faster than them. But you have to keep going. It's an hour or two to the edge. With the communicator, they'll find you before that."

She nodded. "What about you?"

"I'll be right behind you. But don't wait. Don't slow down. Just go, go, go! Got it? "

Olympia nodded.

"Okay. I'm going to start by throwing you. Step in my hands."

Akil grabbed the bark of the branch to hold himself in a crouch as Olympia put her feet in his hands, pulling her legs up. As he thought they might, the Forest People ignored a posture that probably resembled their normal coupling.

"Now, jump!"

He jumped too, thrusting away from the branch and up with his arms as her long, coltish legs uncoiled with surprising strength. She shot rapidly up and away, vanishing in the foliage above like a human bullet.

Akil drifted up much more slowly, but still fast enough to elude the snatches of the Forest People. He bent his body to glide toward a vine, the only thing that looked to be in reach. The Forest People saw that and rushed for it. There was nothing he could do but hope that he got a handhold before they got to him.

He just made it, and jerked the vine back with as much strength as he

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had left in him. The mass of the Forest People pulling themselves along the vine actually helped him gain that much more momentum. He vaulted over them, avoided their outstretched hands, and shot out into the gloom of the forest.

There was time for a momentary respite, time to figure out what to do. Marianne was back there. having who knew what done to her. His previous life beckoned him from above.

Thinking about it was paralyzing him, he realized. If he was going to try to rescue Marianne, he'd best get going. Same if he was going to try to escape. Forest People started to boil out of the gloom behind him; that decided it. He jumped back toward the clearing and toward where he'd last seen Marianne.

They hadn't been expecting that, and three jumps later when he reached it, it was deserted. He jumped through in the direction Sharada and Marianne had taken. Curiously, despite the effort, he felt better than he had in the last week; the nutrients and the sugar fruit had kicked in. He ricocheted from tree to vine to branch to tree, finding a rhythm.

He overshot, not seeing the spear tip until he was well past it. He turned and, not looking where he was going, crashed full on into the rubbery surface of a huge elephant-ear leaf vine. He was dizzy, terribly dizzy. He grabbed hold and tried to breathe. Gradually his head cleared. Where was it?

There. Above him, as his semicircular canals settled down in the milligee field. The same vine, it followed a curve that led back along his route. He could only see the tip of the stick.

A red globule the size of his fist drifted by.

He groaned and jumped for the stick.

She was there, pinned through her abdomen, apparently unconscious, as the sap from the vine rose slowly around her. He pushed himself over to her and felt her neck. Her heart was still beating. How bad a wound was it, internally? Could he take her with him? Or did he have to find help? How long did he have before the wound, or the vine, killed her?

He'd be surrounded by Forest People in a minute and end up the same way. Or her Hazian doppelgänger would be along to finish the process, whatever that meant. He had to move her, but move her without killing her. If he could break the spear off just above the wound. . . .

He tried to move it, experimentally. It moved easily; but wouldn't pull back at all. Marianne moaned. It wasn't seated well enough to break off, and he didn't dare try to pull it back through her with that resistance; it might be barbed.

What the hell was he to do? If the spear had just gone a little deeper into the vine, it might be set firmly enough to snap it off. That might injure her a little more, but an autodoc could deal with that later. There was another branch above her. He'd have to jump from that right down on the end of the spear and hope the momentum of his body would push it in far enough.

It hurt like hell as the blunt end of the spear slipped through his hand and hit his rib cage, but nothing broke, he thought. He moved the end of the spear, and the result was as stiff as he hoped.

Marianne moaned again, but did not wake.

Trembling, he put his feet beside her, grabbed the spear with the left hand and pushed with the right. It snapped off cleanly above the wound. Now for the hard part.

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She moaned and opened her eyes. "Akil, oh, Akil. Get away while you can."

His hand was slippery with her blood. "No way. I'm going to get you out of here."

"It's too late," she whispered. "It's too late," she said so softly that he could barely hear her. "The vine; its tendrils have grown into me; into my body and my head. I can feel them . . . moving. Tracing my . . . axons, Sharada says, modeling my brain."

"I'll cut them off. The autodoc will clean them out."

"I, I don't think you should try. Sharada said my other self needs to close loop, or it will be incomplete."

Akil froze, uncertain. "I don't understand."

"There needs to be a—" Marianne gasped "—a calibration of hormonal responses to your thoughts—otherwise the feelings don't come out right. Our minds aren't all synapses; our chemistry is part of it too; glands, emotions, the whole system. My double needs to sample my blood as we run through memories to get that right."

"To hell with the double."

"No, no." Marianne groaned. "I don't want it to become what Sharada is now, or worse. She can't be completely human or she couldn't have done this to me. The Hazian consciousness doesn't understand this is wrong for us." Marianne gasped and tears ran down her cheeks. "Akil, everyone dies someday and all that matters afterward is: for what? This contact needs someone who's fully human as well as Hazian." Her voice became a whisper. "I have to try."

"No, " Akil said. "No way. I'm taking you back, somehow. Now. Stavros says they're going to make a try to pick us up, then pull everything off the planet and maybe out of the system."

"Akil, please. If I die when you try to cut me out, all that will be left of me would be an incomplete monster. Alone with another incomplete monster. I don't want that."

Akil's heart pounded as he fought back tears. There seemed to be no way to win. "Where's Sharada?" he asked. When in doubt, get information.

"Don't know. Maybe she's back at the . . . replicator, watching. She wants me." Marianne closed her eyes. "Get out of here, Akil," she whispered. "Save yourself."

"The . . . completion. Will it kill you?"

It took her a while to answer. Finally, very softly, she said, "Don't know. May last quite a while like this. The Hazian . . . consciousness knew not to hit anything vital this time. My body . . . sealing off the shaft. Our great genetic engineering."

He looked at her wound; it was clotting already as her body tirelessly fought the intrusion, as it would until death. "Okay, I'll wait until after, then try to cut you free."

She shuddered. "No, run now while you can. Can't tell what's going to happen. If . . . it doesn't work with me, they might try with you."

She was, he realized, everything he wanted from life. He was not going to let her go. He was not going to endure two such experiences in less than a subjective year.

"No, I'm going to take that chance." He put his hand on her forehead, still free from the sap.

"Thanks," she said, "that helps." She took a deep, ragged, breath. Then seemed to fall asleep.

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This was madness. He would free her, take her and run. Even if she shut down, they'd brought people back after twenty, thirty minutes, as he remembered. The sky cycles could be here in less time than that. Contact could come later. He took his obsidian knife and started shaving the fibrous sap away from her. It was tougher than it seemed and there was so little time. He fought despair and hacked away as efficiently as he could.

"No, Akil." Her voice, firm and strong, came from behind him. "That is *my* body."

He turned and there she was, the hermaphrodite version, pulling herself along the vine. He froze, and looked around for Forest People. There were none. Who was this, in Marianne's body?

"What I have to do will not kill the body. I need to make sure this . . ." she pointed to her head, ". . . matches that." She pointed at herself pinned to the tree. "I can take the pain away, too. I know how, now. Please do not worry."

"Where's Sharada."

"I told them to go back when I saw you. They're watching, from a distance. If you do not want to watch—please turn away. I will let you know when we are done, then talk to us."

"Please," Marianne, pinned to the tree, whispered.

He was holding a knife. He could try to kill the doppelgänger immediately. But that might destroy the only hope of life Marianne had left. Could he believe it . . . her? There are times to act and times not to act; a Buddhist had once said, "Don't just do something, stand there," and then Hippocrates, "First of all, do no harm."

Unable to trust his voice, he quietly turned away and grabbed the vine with his hand digging his fingers in. In a fit of self loathing, he let its sap slowly start to envelop his hand. It was almost body temperature and felt almost comforting. But he ripped it away when he felt the subtle stinging of invading tendrils.

"Done, Akil, " two voices said, in unison.

He turned. The Marianne pinned to the vine smiled at him, seemingly at peace. "It worked," they said, grinning.

The Hazian Marianne turned toward him, and sighed. "Do you love me?"

He stared at her, not comprehending.

"What we went through here is the stuff of legend. So if you promise to spend the rest of eternity with me, then you have my permission to shave my me off the vine and take me to an autodoc. It might work; the Caretaker doesn't know. It regrets our unhappiness, but Sharada was an imperfect instrument and it didn't understand. Part of me will be left behind and the part that isn't will always wonder. For you, I will bear that suffering.

"But, if it isn't love and it isn't forever, don't torture me. Let this be. If I have to lose you sometime anyway, it may as well be now. I will still be *me,* made out of Hazian cells, yes, but me much more me than Sharada is Sharada. And I might be able to salvage this contact, being fully human and able to communicate with the Caretaker. So I have to stay."

"You'll be alone . . . with Sharada."

A tear appeared on the face of Marianne the Hazian. "The . . . stakes are far more important than I am, far more important than my happiness. Things may change in the future. I may be able to fix her. I can endure."

Akil grabbed the hand of the body on the tree; it was cold. Too late, he thought. He thought about Haze and Shadow, the trunk with M&A, crazy thoughts about guiding tourists, about watching the volcanoes grow and

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subside, and about being around when the Hazian's came home. He thought about Marianne's uncomplicated, forthright sensuality, and the beautiful, ancient forest around him.

A terrible solution formed in his mind, a way they could still stay together. And it scared the hell out of him that he could even consider it. Then he looked at the Mariannes.

This, he realized, would make a *real* legend. It was a chance to do something that came rarely in even an indefinite lifetime. Legends weren't made by cowards. Perhaps, he thought, if the Hazian consciousness and humans cooperated, maybe what was done could someday be undone.

"Tell me," he asked Marianne, hardly believing his own words, "could I join you this way?"

She opened her mouth, shut it, and finally said. "Yes. Akil, are you sure?

He shuddered. "Don't ask again, let's just do it."

"Akil, you'll need a vagina, or the equivalent, somewhere. Where do you want it?"

Can you handle this, was what she meant. Could he overcome his prejudices and squeamishness. Did he have the guts to go through with it? He felt acute embarrassment, but he had to face this to be with her. . . . "Uh, the usual place is fine. I, look, uh, I've even had fantasies, about reversing roles and having you . . ."

She grinned. "Me too. Do you want breasts too?" She sounded hopeful.

He shuddered. "Uh . . . no, this is going to be strange enough. I want to look like myself. Maybe later." Maybe body form would ultimately be no more important to him than clothes had become. "Here?"

"Yes."

Not trusting himself to say anything more, he removed his pouch and floated down beside Marianne's body, the microgravity settling him as gently as a feather against the smooth moist surface. They would become part of the vine, he thought, and their non-Hazian bodies would be found together like this in maybe a hundred million years by some other very confused explorers.

"I'd like to pass on the spear, too," he said, half expecting her to say it was somehow necessary and getting ready to accept the wound.

"Hold my hand," whispered Marianne on the tree.

Had he really heard her? He took the right hand, the one that he had cut free from the vine. Cold now, but there was still the hint of a grip. The Hazian Marianne took his other hand and stretched him between the two of her and held him down so that his back was pressed firmly against the vine. He began to feel wet and sticky. Then there was a stinging in the back of his head, his buttocks, his thighs and his calves. It stung. He gasped.

The Hazian Marianne let go of his hand and floated around to his front. He was firmly stuck, now.

"I will take away the pain," she said, and enveloped him in her arms and legs, caressed him with her lips, and brought him up and into her. There was no pain; he felt only the pressure of her around him. But something warm flowed back through him, something settling and anesthetic.

Then it began. O

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Stickwoman

There really should be an entry for "Bardo" in the Grant & Clute *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), so prevalent is this fantasy motif in modern times. Tibetan religious doctrine originally defined bardo as the testing passage between death and one's next reincarnation, but the term has come to be applied more widely to any period of struggle bridging one stage of living with another. In recent books such as Damon Knight's *Humpty Dumpty* and Richard Grant's *Tex and Molly in the Afterlife* (both 1996), protagonists undergo literal or metaphorical deaths, followed by enormous struggles to be reborn. Understanding the true meaning of one's earlier existence is perhaps the single prerequisite for success in such quests —although even so, any triumphs can still be decidedly mixed.

Jonathan Carroll's newest novel, *The Marriage of Sticks* (Tor, hardcover, $23.95, 256 pages, ISBN 0-312-87193-7/Victor Gollancz, hardcover, £16.99, 282 pages, ISBN 0-575-06615-6) falls neatly into this mode of psyche-pilgrimage. Divided exactly in half, the book's very structure mimics the gap between eras in the life of its deeply rendered protagonist. And although the first half of the book—what might be termed the mortal half—is less overtly intriguing than the supernatural portion, in retrospect the long opener seems utterly essential.

Miranda Romanac is a thirty-something used-book dealer (note her traditionally stuffy and reclusive occupation) who has gradually shut down major areas of her emotional life. Her love affairs have all gone sour, starting way back with her vital first high-school crush, and she faces an uncertain yet probably sterile and lonely future. Then she meets two people who will send her life on a roller-coaster where the peaks offer intense bliss and the depths conceal peril to her very soul. One figure is Frances Hatch, an elderly free spirit with mysterious occult leanings. The other is a married man, Hugh Oakley, with whom Miranda begins an intense love affair that eventually leads to Hugh's divorce and union with Miranda. All seems fine until an unthinkable tragedy occurs (no disclosure here; you need to be and will be surprised by Carroll's deft shocker). This dramatic event sends Miranda over the edge of sanity—or into some kind of hypersanity—and into a realm of ghosts and spirit guides who reveal to her the truth behind her life, and demand of her the ultimate sacrifice.

Narrated in the first person (except for a touching coda), Carroll's book succeeds in capturing Miranda's personality in depth (perhaps too much so in the first half, when her fuss-budget nature sometimes irks to the point where even Frances is forced to call her "prissy"). And at times, Hugh Oakley seems a bit too perfect as a lover—but then again, that's always been the duty of the grail-like soulmate, in this case unconventionally the male of the pair. But in the astonishing surreal head-trip that forms the book's second

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half, such stolid types serve as valuable anchors.

This subtle and knowing book, like Graham Joyce's *The Requiem* and Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (both 1995), subverts the reality we take for granted, revealing a hidden stratum of glorious wonder. And like its ur-model, Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *The Marriage of Sticks* (the term refers to a pyre for desire) illustrates that the possibility of salvation hides where we least expect it.

Graceful Swan and Orphan of the East

From the writer who created amusing and resonant alternate lifetimes for former VP Danny and First Lady Hillary in two notorious short stories, we can expect any full-length counterfactual novel to be a complex and masterful affair. And Pamela Sargent does not disappoint in her latest book, *Climb the Wind* (HarperPrism, hardcover, $25.00, 436 pages, ISBN 0-06-105029-6). This novel—which ideally should be read in conjunction with Harry Turtledove's similarly themed and peopled *How Few Remain* (1997)—explores the intriguing period of US history that followed hard on the tail of the Civil War, a period when so much of the nation's future seemed up for grabs.

Unlike Turtledove's novel, Sargent's book focuses on the Native Americans of this era. A leader named Touch-the-Clouds, who in our timeline had little impact, ultimately becomes in Sargent's hands an American "khan," uniting warring tribes and bringing the conflict between European and Amerindian cultures right to the Federal doorstep. This long campaign of battle and politics that Sargent meticulously details results in a world where justice is appreciably increased—no utopia, but a definite redressing of harms and an opening of possibilities.

Sargent maneuvers through her tale by employing multiple viewpoints, many of them the "celebrity" figures Turtledove also utilizes: Edison, Teddy Roosevelt, Custer, Twain, *et al.* Her depictions of these icons is standard. But the real weight and excitement of Sargent's book is carried by three imaginary characters: Lemuel Rowlandson, Katia Rubalev, and Grigory Rubalev. This trio share complex interactions and emotional attachments, and their progress through the many years of the story's unfolding represents the real drama, distinct from national affairs.

Lemuel, the Orphan, is an Indian from the East raised by whites, who eventually becomes a Union soldier and, when the war is over, a minor Washington functionary. Once out West, his curiosity about Touch-the-Clouds's activities bring him into contact with Grigory Rubalev, a wild-eyed Alaskan Russian intent on avenging the insults offered his own people. Allying himself with Touch-the-Clouds, Rubalev will function as kind of a fearsome Rasputin, until he meets his long-delayed comeuppance. Katia, also called Graceful Swan, is Rubalev's ward, likewise an Indian orphan. Her relationship with Lemuel starts out inauspiciously, but eventually a love affair kindles between them, in the interstices between their long battle for fair treatment of their people.

There is little actual fantasy in this volume, save for the real supernatural visions Lemuel and Katia experience. But Sargent fulfills the SF writer's credo by rigorously exploring the historical dialectic between impersonal forces and individual human actors with wisdom

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and real insights, all the while delivering a stirring account of a revolution-that-never-was embodied in flesh and blood participants who demand our sympathy and affection.

Laurie's Story

Someday, utilizing my Copious Spare Time, I'd like to do a survey of all the novels written since 1954 on the topic of pop music. To see the way the depiction of rock'n'roll has changed over the years—and how it's remained the same—would be fascinating and entertaining, I'm sure. Novels by insiders, novels by hacks, novels by fans, novels by musicians—a wealth of angles from which to examine a phenomenon that means so much to so many people.

But until that day, I'll have to content myself with sampling a music-themed novel here and there. The latest to fall into my lap comes from a writer well-known in our SF arena, Lewis Shiner. *Say Goodbye: The Laurie Moss Story* (St. Martin's, hardcover, $22.95, 256 pages, ISBN 0-312-24110-0) is not Shiner's first dance with pop music, of course, as his previous book *Glimpses* (1993) will attest. Nor is it his first book to focus on the lives of social outcasts: check out Shiner's skatepunk novel *Slam* (1990) for his previous work in that milieu.

The first thing that strikes me about *Say Goodbye* is its technical innovations and expertise. The novel is composed of numerous bite-sized segments, giving it the feel of some kind of Fillmore West slide show biography. Second, the telling alternates between first-person (the narrator is a never-named minor-league journalist half in love with his subject) and omniscient, as the narrator struggles to recreate through research the events of Laurie Moss's two-year wrestling match with pop-music stardom for his book project. This fusion represents a neat doubling of the storyline, as we become intimate both with Laurie's life and the personal upheavals experienced by "this reporter."

Laurie Moss, twenty-something Texas gal, moves to LA in 1994 with stars in her eyes and a large share of musical talent. Shiner quickly assembles around her an attractively eccentric cast of fellow musicians and industry types, the most crucial of whom will prove to be Skip Shaw, aging forgotten superstar of another era. The awkward romance between Skip and Laurie parallels her musical career, veering between optimistic glee and cynical despair. The vector of Laurie's musical journey is never straightforward, and Shiner keeps us guessing about her fate right up to the very end.

As Walter Pater reminded us, "All art constantly aspires toward the condition of music," and books actually about music hew to this rule most of all. It's extremely difficult to convey the excitement of notes in the air with words on the printed page, but Shiner succeeds more often than not, especially in several moments when Laurie and her band hit the road. This novel exercises no satirical impulses, but strives toward and achieves a kind of amiable verisimilitude and *au courant* flavor. Any grungy grittiness is likewise eschewed, with even the odd groupie incident receiving PG-rated treatment. This novel is a gentle, not a shocking look at life in the not-so-fast lane.

Will Laurie Moss end up as forgotten as Katrina Leskanich (Katrina and the Waves) or a cult favorite like Aimee Mann? Shiner has no illusions about success and its demands, but he's wise enough to realize that a life without hope and dreams is no tune fit for singing either.

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The Modern Apocalypse

A remarkable short story by J. G. Ballard called "Now Wakes the Sea" opens with this line: "Again at night Mason heard the sounds of the approaching sea, the muffled thunder of long breakers rolling up the nearby street." I was instantly reminded of this Ballard piece upon plunging into the bracing waters of Steve Erickson's *The Sea Came in at Midnight* (Bard, hardcover, $23.00, 259 pages, ISBN 0-380-97766-4). Erickson's mimetically taut yet surreally loose novel, in addition to sporting a few particularly Ballardian sentences, deals with similar themes of anomie in the face of society's indifference, and the ineluctably destructive nature of time. Both writers share mixed feelings toward the everyday apocalypses they chronicle, alternately embracing and rejecting destruction as if it were a draining lamia whose kisses were nonetheless irresistibly thrilling.

This is Erickson's sixth novel, and if you haven't caught up with him until now, you have a real treat in store. One of the prime purveyors of "slipstream" writing, Erickson resides solidly in the middle of the talented camp of postmodern genre-mixers that includes Pynchon, Bowman, Burroughs, and many others intent on slicing and dicing conventional fiction into crazy salads of high and low culture.

Like a rogue comet, Erickson's novel orbits eccentrically around two main characters and a number of subsidiary figures of almost equal importance. Weaving in and out among his time-broken troupe, Erickson eventually succeeds in linking up all their fates ouroboros-style, revealing hidden connections that foster the somewhat claustrophobic atmosphere here, as if we were privy to a group of souls hermetically sealed in their own private hell. The two most significant people in the story are Kristin Blumenthal, a young woman who escapes from a mass cult suicide at the end of 1999, and the man known only as The Occupant who comes across the lost Kristin and offers her a temporary home. The Occupant, who calls himself an "apocalyptologist," reveals to Kristin that the world really ended on May 7, 1968, at 3:02 A.M., Paris time. It turns out that this represents a personal climacteric for The Occupant, but as with Ballard, for Erickson the personal is always public, and vice versa.

The degenerate landscape around the characters certainly supports their faith in decay. Black market memories stolen from graves are traded in Japan, snuff films are popular, and even "non-mercenary" sex is predatory. The theory that these are truly the end times is further borne out by segments of the narrative that flashforward twenty years to a lone survivor in a ruined San Francisco who might at last unriddle the enigmas that have haunted his contemporaries.

Erickson's clear-eyed, hypnotic prose is wrapped around many magical-realistic touches, such as a Paris gunshot heard clear across the Atlantic, and black satellite dishes ("rips in the fabric of a millennium") that transmit visionary material to the TVs of their owners. Motifs of lost parents run throughout the book, as do cinematic issues of representation versus reality. But Erickson's main theme is probably the one explicitly stated in this fragment: ". . . the question of when and where the imagination becomes accountable by and to whom, beginning with the one who imagines a nightmare simply for the thrill of its imagining . . ." This core dilemma of the imagination's responsibility certainly resonates with daily newspa-

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per headlines, and powers Erickson's book with undeniable force.

As a signpost pointing subtly toward a route away from a third millennium of Western madness, this book demands your attention.

Forties Eyes

At least three or four stylistic strands weave their way through K. W. Jeter's audaciously deranged, boldly, and archetypically titled new novel, *Noir* (BantamSpectra, mass-market, $23.95, 484 pages, ISBN 0-553-57638-0). Yet such is Jeter's talent that all the allusive warp and weft threads (which might clash in less capable hands) cohere into a dazzling homogenous fabric of his own unmistakable design.

Any book titled *Noir* must inevitably pay homage to the Chandler-Hammett-Cain school of writing, as well as the cinematic landmarks of hard-boiled, down-and-dirty scamming. Thus, Jeter's protagonist is a futuristic PI named McNihil, embarked on a quest for a dangerous MacGuffin, a quest that will allow him to traverse any number of milieus where Jeter can utilize to best advantage his massive literary and conceptual chops. Indeed, McNihil embodies the concept of noir to the ultimate degree: interpretive hardware and software in his visual circuits overlay his perceptions of the world with the perpetually nighted look and feel of a Hollywood stage-set. This PI finds the world ready-made for his smart-aleck cynicisms.

McNihil's exterior world is really the Gloss, a bizarre urban conglomeration that literalizes the concept of the "Pacific Rim" by linking all the metropoli lying on that ocean by a system of railways (air traffic is forbidden, thanks to perpetually stalking aerial predators). The Gloss is fractured along rich/poor, high-tech/lo-tech fault lines, which resonates with another school of writing, namely cyberpunk. Jeter's detailed speculations—notably along biological lines—further uphold the radical tenets of this mode. Baroque and satirical aspects of Jeter's presentation summon up links to Alfred Bester and Jack Womack. But certainly the primary tutelary deity hovering over this novel is the spirit of Philip K. Dick.

Jeter has always been a primo Dickhead, and was in fact tapped recently to create two best-selling *Bladerunner* sequels. But in this book he has surely reached some kind of pinnacle in faithfully and inventively channeling Dick's spirit. Consider: in the Gloss, the homeless are fitted out by charities with permanently bonded beetle shells as portable shelter, rendering them into scuttling insectoid trashpickers.

Beyond death lies a half-life for those who expire in debt, the animated corpses functioning as oracles to work off their debits. Corporations, following "Pimp-Style Management" techniques, force their employees to live 24/7 in their cubicles, a different box each night, the better to break their will. A class of replicants known as Prowlers exist in fluctuating master-slave relationship with those humans addicted to them. And so on for innumerable great riffs.

Jeter defines the essence of noir as betrayal, and his book is fascinatingly stuffed with intricate double-dealing and paybacks—although it is interesting to see that love and gratitude win out in the end, although not without great sacrifice.

Echoing PKD's grand theme, Jeter's ambitious, in-your-face novel succeeds in shredding "the ultimate mask, which concealed a difference greater than that between human and fake."

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Immortal Remains

"Weird shit just happens to your family." Such is the observation offered by a friend to Matthew Reynman in Don Webb's second novel, *Essential Saltes* (St. Martin's, hardcover, $21.95, 243 pages, ISBN 0-312-20302-0), and truer words were ne'er spoken. Weird doings in a Webb story are certainly no surprise, but the way Webb manages to render the everyday textures of one man's commonly uncommon life while still delivering occult thrills deserves special notice. It's no easy thing to anchor weirdness in palpably authentic felt experience.

This new book is not a direct sequel to Webb's prior *The Double* (1998), but something much more interesting: an exploration of hitherto unexamined branches of the bizarre Reynman family introduced earlier. In *The Double*, game designer John Reynman experienced a kind of bardo (there we go again) followed by a hieros gamos that left him enlightened. In this new novel, John's younger brother Matthew—owner of a used-book store in Austin, Texas, and part-time pyrotechnician—is fated to undergo equally odd experiences that dovetail with his brother's. John and his foxy paramours, Camilla and Cassilda, show up in Austin eventually to help, providing kicks for any readers of the earlier book. But the main spotlight here right from the start is on Matthew, and enjoying his story requires no prerequisite knowledge.

Some years before *Essential Saltes* opens, Matthew's wife Haidee was murdered by a psychotic killer. Now the killer is on the loose and gunning for Matthew. As if that weren't problem enough, someone in Matthew's social circle has stolen Haidee's ashes with an eye toward performing a supernatural ritual with these "essential saltes." Meanwhile, Matthew's book store, The New Atlantis, is being picketed by protesters convinced he's a racist—just because he got into a tussle with a crack-smoking black friend in the restroom of the store. Other troubles large and small, from parental misunderstandings to fanboy nuttiness, also flavor the stew.

Through this alternately dangerous and funny muddle, Matthew bumbles with a mixture of wisdom and foolishness, just like a typical Blaylock protagonist (see below)—or just as you or I in a similar situation probably would. Webb makes it easy to empathize with Matthew in any number of deft ways, from his love of fireworks to his rueful battle with diabetes. Overall, there's less of *The Double*'s Phil Farmer buzz in this book, and more of an *Unknown* feel: a typical man-in-the-street catapulted into eerie doings and yet somehow managing to cope.

The ending of *Essential Saltes* offers the sweetest emotional payoff I've encountered in many a year, expertly making all the prior Frankenstein imagery extra-relevant. If Don Webb's next book is much better than this one, it'll be downright scary.

There is Water Underground

James Blaylock is our postmodern Ray Bradbury, version 2.0 of the Awestruck Kid from Illinois with plenty of amazing nineties sophistications and technical improvements. He's a bard of simple pleasures and simple folks, of homey, comic surfaces beneath which lurk all sorts of oddities and enigmas, cruelties and tragedies. His heroes are mainly Little Tailors who want nothing more than peace and quiet and a full stomach for one and all, his villains obsessed, vain, deadly

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goofy Gollums intent on having their way no matter what the cost to themselves and their victims. Blaylock's books are paradoxically otherworldly and mundane, a potent mix that Don Webb also hits in his book discussed above.

Blaylock's newest, *The Rainy Season* (Ace, hardcover, $21.95, 356 pages, ISBN 0-441-00618-3), is not his most complexly plotted or most emotionally ravishing book, but it's still got plenty of what makes Blaylock great.

Phil Ainsworth, photographer, lives alone in an old house in Southern California, and finds himself in danger of gradually becoming a lonely hermit. His isolation is shattered in Chapter 2 by the announcement that with the death of his sister, he has become the guardian of his niece Betsy, resident in Austin. Such news alone would turn around most lives. But Phil also happens to have on his property an intermittently haunted well with most peculiar properties, a well just now reactivated by unusually heavy rains. This supernatural locus draws a host of sympathizers and enemies to his property, and the subsequent week will be the most hectic, stimulating, and dangerous in Phil's life.

Blaylock's heavies on this outing are Haze Appleton, ancient leader of an old cult, the Societas Fraternia, and his young assistant, Elizabeth Kelly. They know the secrets of the well, and are intent to secure its benefits at any cost. Mrs. Darwin, Betsy's covetous neighbor from Austin, crops up as well, her own psychotic schemes alternately meshing and conflicting with Appleton's. Aiding Phil are a secretive priest and a woman literally sucked from the past. Together, they just might trump avarice and hatred.

Hypocrisy, though, is Blaylock's number one target. (Curiously, the linked trait of wistful self-deception seen in his heroes frequently garners his approbation.) His bad guys lie through their teeth until even their allies are confused, and this is frequently their undoing. As their machinations become more balled-up and knotted, self-destruction becomes their only way out. Blaylock's heroes usually win through a combination of their own integrity and the self-defeating yen for overcomplexity evidenced by their opponents.

Weaving beautiful images of rain around such issues as lost identity and the fleetingness of time, Blaylock generates a sense of urgency muffled by eternity, a feeling best encapsulated in one of Phil's observations: "[N]ice things, including eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee, were timeless, as was the very idea of breakfast, and . . . some things, all the really important things, never went out of fashion."

Cornucopia of *Contes*

Immediately cease all complaining about a dearth of single-author short-story collections! As the necessarily but lamentably laconic catalog that follows will surely show, we are living in some kind of Silver Age for such candybox compilations.

Editors Richard Lupoff and Grania Davis have put together a winner with *The Investigations of Avram Davidson* (St. Martin's, hardcover, $24.95, ISBN 0-312-19931-7). Gathering thirteen of Davidson's unique mysteries, mostly from *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine,* this volume flows smoothly out of last year's *Treasury.* Short zingers that spin O. Henry endings—"Murder Is Murder," "The Necessity of His Condition"—mix well with longer and more surreal pieces such as my favorite, "The Lord of Central Park," in which the Mafia, British nobility, and Olde Dutch partisans mingle

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with career girls and anarchists. Ranging across eras, Davidson's stories find that the human condition is mostly unvarying, yet continually perplexing, a stew of comedy and tragedy, farce and horror.

Lupoff's comments on Davidson can also be found reprinted in Lupoff's own new collection from Gryphon Press (PO Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228), *Writer At Large* (trade, $15.00, 154 pages, ISBN 1-58250-009-6). This book hosts stories of the kind arbitrarily denoted as "true," anecdotes from Lupoff's varied career. But they are cast in the form of intriguing narratives, relating such incidents as the author's tenure in a Berkeley bookstore, his parlous stint teaching prisoners, and his encounter with the IRS, an institution that stubbornly refuses to understand the writing life. Witty, ironic, lucid, and insightful, these reports from one man's creative frontiers make for joyful reading.

The latest beautiful and comprehensive volume from NESFA Press (PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701) brings back into the light one of modern SF's seminal giants, Anthony Boucher. In *The Compleat Boucher* (hardcover, $25.00, 529 pages, ISBN 1-886778-02-7), you'll discover that polymathish Boucher could turn out pure science fiction, fantasy, horror, and quasi-detection stories with equal ease and grace. Whimsical demons ("Snulbug" and "Nellthu") vie with robotic saints ("The Quest for Saint Aquin") and saintly roboticians ("QUR" and "Robinc") to illustrate Boucher's immense talents. My favorite story, "We Print the Truth," is the most affecting example of wishes gone wrong that I can recall since "The Monkey's Paw." True, Boucher's stories are old-fashioned in a way that, say, Sturgeon's are not. Much has changed in narrative fashions over the past fifty years, and craftsmen like Boucher and Fredric Brown often employed story templates now discarded by current writers. But there is no denying that Boucher—anthologist, critic, and founder of *F&SF*—had the genuine "pelagic spark."

Harold Jaffe's stories in *Sex for the Millennium* (Black Ice Books, trade, $9.00, 174 pages, ISBN 1-57366-078-7) remind me of the dysfunctionally erotic work of Marco Vassi. In twelve disturbing tales, many cast in dialogue format, Jaffe deconstructs the godawful mess simple intercourse has become in our over-complexified world. My selection for best entry is "Cancer is the Mother," in which a terminally ill man lives out the fatalistic dreams we all secretly harbor. Crisp and economically lurid, these tales somehow trace the absent shape of sane desire surrounded by madness. (Black Ice Books, Unit for Contemporary Literature, Campus Box 4241, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790.)

Like his fellow poet-fictionist Bruce Boston, David Memmott turns out short, meticulously assembled stories informed by a poet's precision and clarity of image. *Shadow Bones* (trade, $10.00, 116 pages, ISBN 1-877655-28-7), his first collection, issued by Wordcraft of Oregon (PO Box 3235, La Grande, OR 97850), contains charming Dunsanian fables ("Warrior, Falling Awake," and "Moonhunter") as well as tales ranging from the cyberpunkish ("The Bohr Breakthrough") to the Bradburyian ("Closing Ceremonies"). My choice for best of the volume is "Eyes of the Watchdog," a suspenseful piece that reads like *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) as filtered through Ballard. Memmott proves that whatever the length of his line, he's got the real bardic rhythm.

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Bruce Sterling brings us a shuttle-load of his patented brand of near-future wonders with *A Good Old-fashioned Future* (BantamSpectra, mass-market, $6.99, 279 pages, ISBN 0-553-57642-9). Knowing that, why are you still reading *me*? You should already be out of your chair and rushing for the bookstore! Sterling's at the top of his hard-edged speculative form here, with such familiar favorites as "Bicycle Repairman," "Deep Eddy," and "Big Jelly," his collaboration from these pages with Rudy Rucker. Out of these stories, I had previously missed only "Sacred Cow" from the pages of *Omni*, and while it's basically a vignette, Sterling manages to cram more speculation, humor and pathos into eighteen pages than most authors get into ten times that many. Invest in your head by feeding it some Sterling right now!

Take out pen and paper and jot down this address: Mycroft & Moran, PO Box 204, Shelburne, Ontario, Canada L0N 1S0. You'll need this information to order an extraordinary collection, *In Lovecraft's Shadow* (hardcover, $60.00, 351 pages, ISBN 1-55246-003-7). Edited, introduced and annotated with care and intelligence by Joseph Wrzos, this oversized volume collects all of August Derleth's non-collaborative Chthulu Mythos stories, from 1932 to 1971. Arranged into informative groupings, these stories encompass brief shockers such as "The Passing of Eric Holm" and more substantial adventures like "The Return of Hastur," "The Whippoorwills in the Hills," and "The House in the Valley." Wrzos is upfront in his preface about Derleth's shortcomings and tendency to revisionism, but nonetheless the founder of Arkham House was a consummate craftsman and passionate friend to HPL. These tales are never less than entertaining, and sometimes edge close to the real Lovecraftian abyss. Sometimes too callow or blunt, Derleth can also be subtle, as when he describes a mysterious woman thusly: "She was twenty-five, but there were days when she looked much younger, and other days when she looked older." That passage comes from "The Seal of R'lyeh," which stands out for characters who embrace and delight in their damnable fate rather than whine and cringe. Additionally, beautifully wrought B&W illos by the masterful Stephen Fabian evoke Virgil Finlay at his finest, and highlight the prose perfectly.

Darrell Schweitzer's new assemblage, *Refugees from an Imaginary Country* (Ganley + Owlswick, trade, $15.00, 232 pages, ISBN 0-932445-65-9) is also graced with elegant Fabian compositions that complement perfectly Schweitzer's heartily old-fashioned tales. Like a cross between Clark Ashton Smith, Thomas Burnett Swann, and Harlan Ellison, Schweitzer skips across historical and ahistorical periods to examine murderers, sorcerers, everyday heroes, and unnatural villains. Certain themes such as the primitivism of "civilized" man and the treachery of supernatural forces flow from one well-wrought story to another. My choice for best of volume: "One of the Secret Masters," which unveils surprise after surprise in Kershian fashion. Order your copy of this excellent book now from Owlswick Press, 123 Crooked Lane, King of Prussia, PA 19406.

Kit Reed's strong, distinctive, Cassandrian voice rings out clearly from *Seven for the Apocalypse* (Wesleyan, trade, $16.95, 224 pages, ISBN 0-8195-6382-X), a septet of stories surrounding a short novel entitled "Little Sisters of the Apocalypse." Mainstream selections deal with the exquisite agonies attendant on losing a spouse to Alzheimer's ("Voy-

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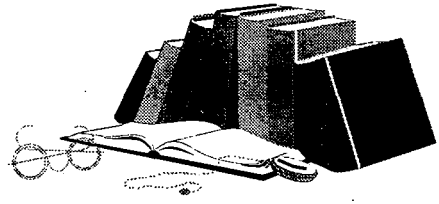
ager"), the shallowness of tourists ("Rajmahal"), and the regrets incumbent on those attending a high-school reunion ("Slumber"). A pair of Kafkaesque fables—"In the Palace of the Dictator" and "On the Penal Colony"—knife home mordant lessons, while a brace of SF tales—"River" and "The Singing Marine"—illustrate Reed's decades-honed speculative talents. The short novel that forms the core of this book is a production worthy of Joanna Russ, Kathy Acker, or Suzy McKee Charnas. Evoking echoes of Zelazny's *Damnation Alley* (1969) and Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* (1967), this tale of isolated women, war-driven men and an order of hog-straddling nuns who "pursue their God at lightspeed" rumbles like a biker bar on payday.

Allow me to describe an impossible figure. The exemplary writer I have in mind would combine the elegant savagery of T.C. Boyle and Will Self with the goofy whimsy of Tom Robbins and William Kotzwinkle, and would blend the shaggy-dog tall tales of R.A. Lafferty with the postmodern conceits of Scott Bradfield and David Bowman. This writer would mix humor and melancholy, outlandish weirdness with mimetic perfection. Having sketched such a chimera, I now reveal that he exists, in the form of Rick DeMarinis, whose *Borrowed Hearts* (Seven Stories Press, hardcover, $24.00, 322 pages, ISBN 1-888363-98-3) gleans winners from several earlier collections as well as incorporating eleven previously ungathered stories. This book is a must-have for any reader concerned with state-of-the-art storytelling.

DeMarinis is a master of the first-person voice, and his surreal omnibus is filled with the ludicrous, touching, hypnotic laments of losers and seekers, the dazed, the confused and the hopeless. From errant missile-silo technicians to wayward husbands, from juvenile delinquents circa 1950 to ultramodern buff babes packing heat, DeMarinis's characters form a rogues' gallery of dangerous souls, as much a menace to themselves as to society. Yet the overall effect of these tales is one of rueful optimism and wry laughter. DeMarinis holds forth our very perversity as a doorway to salvation.

The story that dug its claws deepest into me here was "Medicine Man," the saga of Louis Quenon, half-breed healer who ventures into dangerous psychic territory for which his scattershot training has not prepared him. Our narrator is an elderly man whom Louis has helped, and the understated relationship between the two is typical of DeMarinis's beautifully oblique approach.

In a fable titled "Your Story," DeMarinis contrasts "the vagrant grammar of dreams [with] the tight parsings of authorized reality." This is the precise set of negotiations his wonderful stories mediate so skillfully and entertainingly. O



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Not much doing over the holidays, so now's the time to look toward winter. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. - Erwin S. Strauss

JANUARY 2000

7-9—**RustyCon.** For info, write: **Box 84291, Seattle WA 98124.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(E-mail) bobbied@microsoft.com. (Web) ironhorse.com/~rustycon.** Con will be held in: Seattle WA (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Michael Stackpole, Bear Brown, Jon Gustafson.

7-9—**GAFilk, 2175 Lenox Rd. #B-5, Atlanta GA 30324.** (E-mail) **xwinger@mci2000.com.** Middleton. SF/fantasy folksinging.

14-16—**Arisia, 1 Kendall Sq. #322, Cambridge MA 02139.** (E-mail) **info@arisia.org.** Park Plaza, Boston MA. Yolen, Kidd.

14-16—**ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. (770) 578-8461. info@chattacon.org.** Clarion. Harper, Scott.

14-16—**MarsCon, 429-7 Lester Rd., Newport News VA 23601.** (E-mail) **marscon@erols.com.** Ramada, Williamsburg VA.

15-29—**OR Coast Fiction Writers' Workshop, Box 479, Lincoln City OR 97367. (541) 996-8211. deanwsmith@sff.net.**

15-16—**Florida Extravaganza, 2242 Otter Creek Ln., Sarasota FL 34240. (941) 343-0094.** Convention Center, Orlando FL.

21-23—**ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107.** (E-mail) **confusion@stilyagi.org.** Van Dyke Park Suites, Warren MI.

22-23—**Creation Herc./Xena Show, 100 W. Broadway #1200, Glendale CA 91210. (818) 409-0960.** Pasadena (CA) Center.

28-30—**CapriCon, Box 60085, Chicago IL 60660.** (E-mail) **info@capricon.org.** Hilton, Arlington Hghts. IL. Niven, Luchini.

28-30—**FURther ConFusion, Box 1299, Cupertino CA 95015.** (Web) **furtherconfusion.org.** San Mateo Marriott. Furries.

28-30—**SuperCon, Box 14355, Dinkytown Stn., Minneapolis MN 55414. visi.com/~nstohlma/supercon.** Rochester MN.

FEBUARY 2000

4-6—**SheVaCon, Box 416, Verona VA 24482. (540) 886-2154. sheva@adelphia.net.** Airport Marriott, Roanoke VA.

4-6—**Vulkon, Box 821673, South Florida FL 33082. (954) 441-8735.** Raleigh NC. Commercial Star Trek event.

4-6—**WhoVention, Box 4, Epping NSW 2121, Australia. whovention@eagles.com.auweb.** Rydges, Sydney. Dr. Who.

4-6—**Love Is Murder, Harper College, 1200 Algonquin Rd., Palatine IL 60067. (847) 925-6593.** Schaumburg IL. Mysteries.

5-6—**Wolf 359: SG1, 23 Osprey Cl., Falcon Way, Watford WD2 4RX, UK. wolf359con@aol.com.** London. StarGate 1.

11-13—**KatsuCon, 4140 EBY Dr., Dumfries VA 22026.** (E-mail) **katsucon@katsucon.com.** Hyatt, Arlington VA. Anime.

11-13—**Starfleet Ball, 6 The Street, Sutton Waldron DT11 8NZ, UK. scoopx2@aol.com.** Moat House, Bournemouth.

12-13—**Trek Celebration, 11916 W. 109th #125, Overland Park KS 66210. (913) 327-8735.** Champaign IL. Commercial con.

18-20—**Boskone, Box 897, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311.** (Fax) **776-3243. boskone@nesfa.org.** Sheraton.

18-20—**Ad Astra, Box 7276 Sn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1X9.** (E-mail) **ia@vorku.edu.** Primrose. Kress, Saberhagen, Sheffield.

18-20—**VisionCon, Box 1415, Springfield MO 65801. (314) 886-7219. junior@visioncon.net.** Clarion. Fred Gorham.

18-21—**Gallifrey One, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91609. (818) 752-3756.** Airtel, Van Nuys CA. T. Dicks, Orman. Dr. Who.

AUGUST 2000

31-Sep. 4—**ChiCon 2000, Box 642057, Chicago IL 60664.** Bova, Eggleton, Baen, Turtledove, Passovoy. WorldCon. $150.

AUGUST 2001

30-Sep. 3—**Millennium PhilCon, Box 310, Huntingdon Valley PA 19006.** Philadelphia PA. WorldCon. $135.

AUGUST 2002

29-Sep. 2—**ConJose, Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088.** San Jose CA. WorldCon. $100 for full attending membership.

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NEXT ISSUE

MARCH COVER STORY

Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy Award-winning author **Michael Swanwick**, long a mainstay of the magazine, returns to these pages next issue with our March lead story, taking us to a high-tech future resort where almost anything can be purchased for a price, even your own death, and introducing us to a woman as beautiful, mysterious, and deadly as the cold airless moon itself, in the suspenseful, evocative, and surprising "Moon Dogs."

PLUS OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Hot new writer **David Marusek**, whose novella "We Were Out of Our Minds With Joy" was one of our most popular stories here a few years ago, returns with a cynical and hard-edged look at the not-too-terribly-distant future of investigative television journalism, in "VTV"; Hugo-winner **Charles Sheffield** takes us to a war-torn future where the aftermath of combat can prove as deadly as the battle itself, in a disquieting study of some "Nuremberg Joys"; the madcap King of Gonzo himself, **Eliot Fintushel**, returns with a lyrical, tender, and yet typically inventive look at the peculiar relationship of two very strange people, in the bittersweet story of "Milo and Sylvie"; Hugo-winner **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** shows us how to get "Results"—and then questions if you'd really want them in the first place; veteran author **Tom Purdom** takes a future Casanova to Mercury for a "Romance in Extended Time" that proves considerably livelier—and much more dangerous—than even he had counted on; and popular and prolific new writer **Kage Baker** takes us to a sleepy little California coast town to witness a portentous meeting between "Two Old Men," one that might change the fate of the world forever.

AND OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column takes an explosive look at "Smithereens"; and **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our March issue on sale on your newsstand on January 25, 2000, or subscribe today (you can now also subscribe electronically, online, at our *Asimov's* Internet website, at *http://www.asimovs.com*), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you in the rest of the year!

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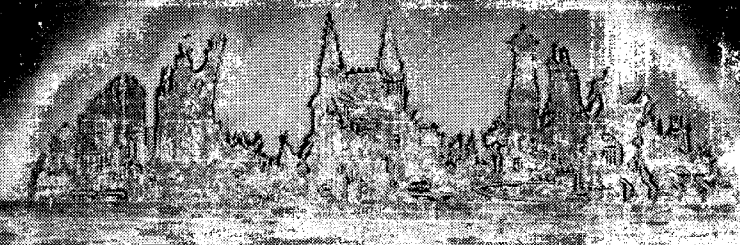

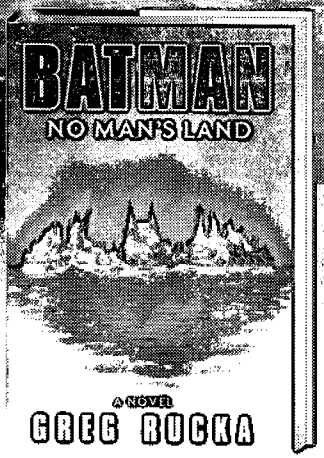

Leveled by a massive earthquake, Gotham City has been completely cut off from outside aid, transformed into a lawless battleground—a No Man's Land. In the midst of the chaos, dedicated Police Commissioner James Gordon and Batman must overcome their differences to reclaim the city.

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